

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF NIGEL BLAIR



"Margaret came softly nearer, and looked over the woman's shoulder."
(Chapter V.)

The Disappearance of Nigel Blair]

[Frontispiece

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF NIGEL BLAIR

By

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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF NIGEL BLAIR

CHAPTER I

MEG AND HER MOTHER

NESTLING among the cliffs of the north coast of Devonshire, in such a fashion that one lost sight of it, saw it, and lost sight of it again, half a dozen times in a walk along the cliff towards it, Rock Hall, an unpretentious house of fair size and simple architecture, stared out over the sea, with little protection from the north side, but embowered very prettily on three sides by tall trees.

Under a June sun its fair garden, which lay between the house and the sea, shone gay with flowers; and the girl who sauntered across the lawn, picking up a dead leaf here, plucking a rose there, was worthy to live in a paradise of them.

Margaret Blair was a lovely young woman of about two-and-twenty years of age, with a sunny face, soft dark eyes, a great mass of dark brown hair which she wore parted in the middle, Madonna-fashion, and a tall, broad-shouldered, well-set-up figure, which gave promise of an activity and strength combined which she indeed possessed.

Around her half a dozen dogs gambolled, a fox-terrier, an Aberdeen terrier, and a collie, being perhaps the most conspicuous and the most obtrusive.

Margaret had a word for each of them, a caress for her favourites, and a smile for the collie.

And Margaret's smile was something worth looking at, not a mere parting of the lips over a wide expanse of regular teeth, like that of a musical comedy actress on a picture postcard, but a merry dimpling of the cheeks and flashing of bright eyes, which made one love the girl and experience a sort of exhilaration in her presence.

At a little distance from her, reclining on a wicker chair under some trees, the branches of which formed a pleasant screen from the hot sun, a lady of middle age, dressed in sombre black, watched the girl with tender eyes.

Attractive as was the girl, the elder lady, who was evidently her mother, had a fascination at least as great, of a wholly different kind. For the contrast between the two ladies was marked and striking, all the more so on account of the extraordinarily strong resemblance between the two from the physical point of view.

Both were tall and well made, regular of feature, dark-eyed, graceful of movement, and decidedly handsome.

But while the daughter seemed to breathe sunshine and exhale happiness, while her smile rippled over her face in waves of joy in existence, the face of the mother

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bore the impress of pain and sorrow so keen that it seemed impossible to believe that she could ever smile again. Her dark hair was streaked with grey, the brightness of her big dark eyes were dimmed by time and grief, the outlines of the handsome face were sharp and worn; but the expression of it was so haunting, so extraordinary, that one could not look at the woman without an involuntary shiver.

It almost seemed as if some dreadful picture were always before those great, melancholy, dark eyes, as if the drawn mouth were always ready to utter a wail of despair.

But the voice, when she spoke, was gentle and mild, without any trace of an emotion stronger than tenderness.

"Meg, you'll spoil your dress playing with those dogs. They'll tear it to pieces."

"Oh, no, mummie, they won't. I'll just tell them it's my best, and then you'll see they'll be as good as gold."

She began to inform the dogs that they must be very good; that they really must keep all four paws on the ground, because she couldn't afford a new muslin dress every day, and the lace on this particular one was too fine to be spoiled by doggies.

Her mother watched her with a faint, sad smile, which suddenly left her face; then she turned to look at the sea, and the tears sprang to her eyes.

Meg, who had seen that her playful words to the dogs amused her mother, saw also the change in her expression, and running across the grass with all the dogs barking after her, she threw herself on her knees beside the wicker chair, took her mother's long thin hand in her warm plump ones, and said—

"Now what have I said that's wrong? I'm always saying the wrong thing, the thing that distresses you, without meaning it."

Her mother looked at her and tried to smile again.

"No, my dear, you don't. You have said nothing wrong. You couldn't. I was only thinking"

"And yet," said Meg tenderly, as she looked at her mother, "you are always telling me I ought to think more. If thinking makes one as sad as it makes you, I don't want to try it."

Her mother smiled again, and put one hand upon her daughter's pretty head.

"Very well, child, perhaps you're right in saying that thought doesn't seem to agree with me. I'll try to follow your example, and think of nothing all day long."

"That's very unfair," cried Meg, half playfully, half reproachfully. "You both seem to think—Nigel and you—that I'm a sort of huge, clumsy butterfly, hovering about without aim or purpose in life, and unworthy of being consulted about anything. I'm sure, if you cared to let me know more than I'm allowed to do, you'd find I am not quite such a goose as you think."

Mrs. Blair's face had grown very grave.

"Be a butterfly as long as you can, my dear. You are the only gleam of sunshine in the house," she said.

A look of deeper gravity than one would have thought the pretty features could wear appeared upon Meg's face.

"Do you know that the way in which Nigel and you always shut up as soon as I come near, and turn to speak to me as if I were a child fresh from its play, hurts and offends me?" she said in a more abrupt tone than she had hitherto used. "I'm two-and-twenty, you know, yet you both always treat me as if I were unworthy to be trusted with any knowledge more important than the number of pounds of sugar you want from the stores or the length of stuff

needed to make covers for the chairs in the morning-room."

Her mother looked at her affectionately.

"You hear everything we have to tell that could give you pleasure, my darling," she said.

Meg sprang up, and put her arm impulsively round her mother's neck.

"Yes, but what I want to know are the things that make you both so unhappy. Of course, there are things; don't shake your head and look frightened. There's no one to hear us, and I can say out what is in my mind. Mammie, I know there is some secret in your lives——"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Blair, drawing herself away, and rising slowly to her feet as if any movement were painful to her.

She walked away from her daughter, who remained sitting on the ground with a very serious expression of face.

For some minutes the elder lady walked about the garden, bending over the roses in the sunny border, and affecting to have forgotten the presence of Meg. But she had not forgotten: and when the girl, who was following her mother anxiously about with her eyes, caught those of the elder lady glancing at her furtively, she sprang to her feet, full of strange emotions, realizing that she had touched some very tender spot, and that she had roused all sorts of sad memories by her words.

The girl's action as she rose attracted her mother's attention, and abruptly making up her mind, Mrs. Blair turned and came across the lawn. Meg could see a new determination in her eyes, and she obeyed hurriedly as her mother pointed to a long garden seat and said—

"Come and sit down with me."

They crossed the grass together and seated themselves on the long

rustic seat, the mother slowly, the daughter quickly and eagerly. She felt sure that she was going to learn something of the trouble which was weighing her mother down, and which had made her brother old and grave for his years.

Clasping her hands together she turned an eager face to her mother; Mrs. Blair laid her thin white fingers on her daughter's hands.

"What is it you want to know, dear?"

Meg looked disappointed. She had thought, from her mother's manner and from the sort of desperation with which Mrs. Blair had led her to the seat, that she would hear all that there was to be told without the necessity of putting a long series of questions. A shade crossed the bright young face as she asked gently—

"Aren't you going to tell me everything? Or must I only hear just what you can't help telling me?"

Mrs. Blair did not answer. She looked away, and Meg saw how deep that mental anguish must be which grew so keen at the slightest reference to it. She slid along the seat and leaned against her mother.

"Never mind, mammie, I don't want to worry you," she said. "Only I should like to know why it is that poor Nigel, who is only thirty-two, has the look and manner of a man of forty-five, and why his hair is already so grey, and—this is very odd indeed, and I'm dying to know it—why he disappears so often, and for such a long time, without letting us, or, at any rate, without letting me, know where he has gone."

"He is away on business," said Mrs. Blair, as if surprised at this question.

"Yes, yes, of course, I know that. But what business? People don't generally make such a mystery of their affairs as he does.

If he doesn't do anything he's ashamed of, why should he be so reticent about it? I've often asked him to tell me where he goes, and what he does, and he always shuts me up as if I were a little child."

"Surely you can trust him! When I'm satisfied, why can't you be?"

"Mummie, mummie, it's only human nature to want to know the secret which seems to have sapped the happiness of one's own mother and brother, now isn't it? And besides"—she hesitated, and stole a shy look at her mother's face—"it isn't only me, mummie; other people are curious about it, too."

Mrs. Blair looked at her quickly.

"What other people?"

"Why, the St. Gowan. Auckland St. Gowan was asking me only the other day why Nigel went away so often, and where he went."

Mrs. Blair looked at her in alarm.

"Auckland St. Gowan!" she exclaimed rather sharply. "When, where was this? When have you met him?"

There was a tell-tale flush in the girl's face as she answered—

"Nigel and I were riding through the park a few days ago when we met Auckland and Agneta, so we rode together a little way. It was then he asked me about Nigel's disappearances."

"Surely he didn't put it like that; he wouldn't be so rude."

"Is it rude? I don't think so. It must puzzle other people, just as it does me, to see him go away and come back again, and without ever having a word to say about his business. I believe Agneta asked him point blank about it; but if she did I'm sure he put her off."

Mrs. Blair looked anxious.

"I don't want him to see too much of Agneta," she said.

"Why not, mummie? She's the nicest girl about here, and Lord and Lady St. Gowan are dears."

The mother cast a sidelong look at the girl. Perhaps she noticed that Meg left out just one of the family from her wholesale commendation.

"They're very nice, and, of course, it's a great thing for you young people to know them and to be invited to the castle so often. But—I shouldn't like to think that Nigel had—had——"

Meg put her head mischievously on one side.

"Or that Agneta had——" suggested she.

Mrs. Blair looked shocked.

"Oh, don't talk such nonsense," she said quickly. "Lord St. Gowan's daughter is in a very different position from ourselves."

"They don't seem to see this mighty difference," retorted Meg mutinously. "Agneta certainly doesn't like Nigel any less than other men; rather the other way, in fact."

"Oh, it's not to be thought of!" cried Mrs. Blair, really frightened. "If Lord St. Gowan were to think that Nigel presumed upon his kindness to—to——"

"To make love to Agneta? Well, if Lord St. Gowan did think so he wouldn't be far wrong," said Meg demurely. "And I'm not at all sure that my lord papa is so dense as you think. And why shouldn't Nigel make love to her? The St. Gowan's are in a better position than we, of course. But, after all, we're not quite sweeps, and if they are poor for their position—and every one knows that they are—we are rich for ours."

"Rich! No, indeed we're not. And at any moment we might——"

She checked herself, and appeared sorry for the words which had slipped out of her mouth.

"We might what, mummie?"

"Oh, never mind. I don't care to be catechized," said her mother restlessly. "But I assure you our prosperity is not a very real thing,

that we are not rich, as you suppose, and that the time may come when we shall have nothing."

She paused, and her daughter looked at her with that hazy incredulity with which the young always do regard such vague threats of the demon poverty, when uttered in the midst of outward prosperity and luxury.

"Oh, well," said Meg with a contented sigh, "I don't want to worry you, mammie, with any more questions, and in return you mustn't frighten me by vague hints of possible indigence. And, after all, if poverty were to come, it might not be unpleasant, for a change. I can do my own hair, and I dare say at a pinch I could make my own dresses."

But her mother did not smile. She was looking out to sea with grave, sad eyes that saw more of the realities of life than did the bright girlish ones.

Suddenly Mrs. Blair became aware, by instinct, for she scarcely heard her daughter move, that something had happened. Looking round at her quickly she saw that a deeper colour was in the girl's cheeks, and that the expression of her face had changed: and glancing in the direction of the house, Mrs. Blair saw a young man in riding dress stepping on to the terrace from the drawing-room window.

"Auckland!" she said nervously. "What does he want, I wonder." And, looking at her daughter, the mother's heart failed her. "For heaven's sake, Meg, don't think too much about him," she said hurriedly, as the young man, still a long way off, came briskly out. "He's not at all steady, and——"

Her admonition ended in a sigh of anxiety as the young man came across the grass towards them.

Auckland, Viscount St. Gowan's only son, was not particularly good-looking or distinguished in

appearance, being of the middle height only, with lank dark hair parted in the middle, good grey eyes with a twinkle of merriment in them, a long and rather aggressive nose, and nothing very striking about his face or figure, though the latter was athletic and agile.

He came forward with an eager air that was attractive and pleasant to see, shook hands with the ladies with an almost boyish air unusual in a man of five-and-twenty, and plunged into an account of his having left Agneta and Nigel behind, as they wanted to "pick ferns, or run races, or chase butterflies, or something ridiculous of that sort."

Mrs. Blair looked frankly dismayed.

"To chase butterflies!" she stammered incredulously.

"Well, I don't know exactly what it was they were doing when I left them, but I saw they wanted to get rid of me: I'm not naturalist enough for them, I suppose, and so I took myself off, and hoped you wouldn't show me quite so plainly as they did that they wished me somewhere else."

"Oh, Auckland, you exaggerate!" gasped Mrs. Blair.

"Not more than is permissible, I think," retorted the young man gaily. "I won't swear that they did actually tell me they wanted to catch butterflies and didn't want me, but that was the impression they gave me. And I'm certain they didn't know at what exact moment I cantered off—there!"

"Oh, Auckland, you can never tell exactly what happened," said Mrs. Blair. "I'm sure there was no reason why they shouldn't see you go."

"Why, yes there was," retorted he. "They didn't see me ride off, because they were too much occupied in each other. And if you didn't know that some such catas-

trophe was fast approaching, why, Mrs. Blair, you are the only person so innocent in the neighbourhood. Nobody else ignores the fact that they are lovesick: simply and frankly unable to see anybody but each other."

"But your father—Lord St. Gowan! Lady St. Gowan!"

"They can see it, too."

Instead of being pleased that the viscount and his wife had no apparent objection to Nigel's attentions to their daughter, the fact seemed to overwhelm Mrs. Blair with consternation which, at any rate before the two young people, she found herself unable to express.

All through Auckland's visit, which he did nothing to shorten, the elder of the two ladies looked harassed and preoccupied, though the younger did her best to atone for this, and appeared to succeed to perfection.

Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a pleasanter way of spending a June afternoon than in eating strawberries and cream in a corner of a sun-lit lawn within sight of the sea, in the society of a girl as charming, as sweet, and as pretty as Margaret Blair. Auckland soon grew sentimental under these combined influences, and pleased himself in recalling the days of their first acquaintance fourteen years before.

"You'll always have to be very civil to me, you know," he said in the midst of these reminiscences, "because I know your real age. You're twenty-two: for I know you were eight when you came here, and that's fourteen years ago."

"You needn't think you're going to hold that over me as a kind of menace," retorted Margaret. "I don't see why a woman should hide her age any more than a man, especially in these days when my sex is supposed to be if anything more intellectual and superior in

every way to yours. I don't mind people knowing I'm twenty-two any more than you mind their knowing that you're twenty-five."

"Then I shall have to find some other way of keeping you in order," said Auckland with decision. "How would you like people to know that you used to have red eyes, and that people thought you plain?"

"I think it's most ungallant of you to remind me of such a time," said Margaret.

"Ah! ha! I've found a vulnerable spot! I'll go on, and harrow your feelings! I remember as well as possible how you used to look, with your little pig-tail down your back and your frocks that you always seemed to have grown out of. We used to call you the solemn family, and wonder who you were and where you came from."

As he spoke Mrs. Blair grew more and more agitated, and looked at him furtively, as if in terror of what he would say next.

"By the bye," Auckland went on, not in the least noticing his hostess's discomfiture, so intent was he upon her daughter, "where did you come from? Scotland, I suppose? Blair's a Scotch name, isn't it?"

The question disconcerted Margaret, who reddened deeply, bit her lip, and glanced at her mother.

"No," she said, while a look of embarrassment appeared in her face; "I don't think we're Scotch. Are we, mammie?"

"No," said Mrs. Blair, so very shortly that the young people, both somewhat disconcerted, were silent for a few moments.

Mrs. Blair's manner, indeed, and the suggestion it conveyed, cast such an unmistakable shadow over the gaiety of the young people that they did not entirely recover their spirits, and Auckland shortened his visit a little in consequence.

When he was gone, Margaret

turned to her mother with some impatience.

"Mammie," she said in a tone of remonstrance, "don't you think you ought at least to let me know something of our family? It's rather absurd, isn't it, for a girl of two-and-twenty not even to know anything about her own grandparents? It's quite embarrassing sometimes, as it was just now, to have to speak in the dark about one's people just as if they were persons one had to be ashamed of." The dark look which appeared on Mrs. Blair's face at these words caused the girl to add hastily, "When we know very well that they were not—that they can't have been."

Her mother said not a word in answer to this, but walked away towards the house, and shut herself up for the rest of the afternoon, not an uncommon thing for her to do when anything happened to disturb her usual resigned placidity.

When she came down again from her room about an hour before dinner-time, her daughter was waiting for her in the hall, with an expression of trouble on her face.

"Mammie," she said, putting a gentle hand within her mother's arm, "I'm sorry to have to worry you again, but I've just heard something I think you ought to know. Andrews was in the village this afternoon when she saw an old gentleman talking to Potter at the little shop. Potter pointed her out to this stranger, and a few minutes afterwards he came up to her and began to ask her questions about this house and about us."

Now Margaret had known very well that her mother would be annoyed by this news, which she had yet felt it necessary to tell her. Whatever effect she may have feared, that produced upon her mother exceeded her expectations. Mrs. Blair stood like one paralysed, not uttering a word or a cry, but

staring before her as if some awful vision had suddenly been conjured up before her eyes.

There was a pause. She did not ask a question, she did not make any comment; but she presently dropped her daughter's arm and retreated slowly upstairs again, bent and languid, as if weighed down by some burden suddenly laid upon her which was greater than she could bear.

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGER IN THE VILLAGE

TEN minutes later the sound of a horse briskly galloping up the avenue on the landward side of the house reached the ears of both mother and daughter. A few seconds afterwards a young man of distinguished appearance and handsome features sprang off his horse at the front door and ran into the house with a light step.

Margaret, who met him, was surprised.

Nigel Blair, who was tall and dark and strikingly like both his mother and sister, was usually grave of manner and almost as melancholy of mien as Mrs. Blair herself. In his curly dark hair there was a plentiful sprinkling of white, which gave him the appearance of being old before his time, and the furrows in his face suggested a greater burden of years than the thirty-two he had lived.

Now he was alert, flushed, his eyes were sparkling, his whole manner changed, so that he seemed to have lost ten years of his age.

His sister, who had been prepared with news for him, now saw that he had news for her.

"Why, Nigel, what has hap-

pened? You look as if you'd had some good news."

He nodded good-humouredly.

"So I have; the best I could hear. Where's mother?"

"In her room, I think. She's got one of her melancholy fits. It's my fault, I think, but I couldn't help myself. Auckland's been here."

Nigel smiled and nodded again, even mischievously.

"Yes, I know; I met him."

He said no more, but was already on his way upstairs. He went straight to the pretty little shady room which his mother used as a boudoir, and found her reclining on her couch in a state of the deepest depression.

He threw himself on his knees beside her, and took one of her hands in his own.

"Mother," he said as he smiled into her sad face, "I have something to tell you."

She raised herself quickly on her elbow and looked into his face with eyes full of fear. Amazed to see that he looked happy, she did not utter the words which rose to her lips, but fell back again puzzled and bewildered.

Holding her hand in his and caressing it gently as he spoke, he went on—

"Mother, we've lived it down, we've lived it down at last! We shall be happy, and we'll make you happy. Agneta loves me, and if I'm not much mistaken Auckland and Meg will make a match of it, too."

But Mrs. Blair seemed stupefied, not pleased, with this news.

"A match of it!" she echoed scornfully; "are you mad?"

But her son still smiled at her and patted her hand reassuringly.

"No, mother, I'm not mad, though I'm so happy that I scarcely feel quite sane. To think that after all these years that we've lived in fear and trembling, in shame and dread of the past and what it might do towards spoiling

the future, there was preparing for us such happiness as this! For you will be happy too; you won't be able to help yourself. The past is buried; we can forget it now. We've buried the old life, the old fears. You and Meg and I can all be happy in the new life we've made for ourselves. We've paid for it; we've earned it. No one could deny that."

There was an exaltation in his face which alarmed his mother, who answered him with the tears running down her cheeks—

"You haven't heard then? I don't know how to tell you. There's a stranger in the village—asking about us. He met Andrews this afternoon and put her through a catechism."

The young man's face fell. Then, after a pause, he recovered himself a little.

"Well, surely there's not much in that!" he said briskly. "Strangers usually do ask questions about everybody and everything, especially of a girl like Andrews, who's a born chatterbox and looks it. Don't worry your head about it. Think how many frights you've had before: and they've always come to nothing—always."

His mother shook her head doubtfully.

"I have a feeling," she whispered fearfully, "that it must come some day, and why not now? Then away go your dreams, your happiness, mine, Meg's—away goes everything but horror and anxiety and misery. Oh, Nigel! Nigel! it's pitiful to have to meet you like this, when you thought you were going to be happy! But how could you ever let yourself think of Lord St. Gowan's daughter when you know what you do know!"

Nigel was impressed, distressed, but not despairing.

"I think you're mistaken, mother," he said gently. "I don't say this blow might never come

upon us, but I don't think it could come quite unexpectedly like this. I think we should have some warning, a letter from our solicitors, perhaps. We should have time to prepare, to"—his voice fell to a whisper—"to run away!"

Mrs. Blair sighed.

"It might be so," she said doubtfully. "But then again it might not. It might come in a thousand ways."

"And it might never come at all," said Nigel robustly. "Mother, you're making a mountain out of a mole-hill. I won't let you spoil my happiness to-day by terrible suggestions which may never be realized. We've passed all these years in peace, and I'm beginning to hope that we may be left in peace to the end."

"What end?" asked Mrs. Blair gloomily.

"The happiest end of all—marriage with those we love," said Nigel solemnly.

Mrs. Blair looked, if possible, more frightened than before.

"But you couldn't marry Agneta without telling her father," objected she.

Nigel looked dubious.

"I should have to consider that point," said he. "I shouldn't tell him all; of course I couldn't. But probably I should have to tell something. That, however, doesn't distress me much: the St. Gowan's have always accepted us at our own valuation. We may say that we've acquired a fresh identity. Why should we go further back than that?"

But the older mind foresaw endless difficulties in the way.

"It's one thing to accept people at their own valuation as acquaintances, even as friends. But a man in the position of Viscount St. Gowan would hardly allow either son or daughter to marry into a family without any sort of pedigree, and moreover with an obvious

mystery attached to it. Remember, I've always been honest: coming here without a family, I've never tried to invent one. We have been mysteries from the outset; we're mysteries still. Believe me, my dear boy, there will probably be a terrible opening of your eyes if you approach Lord St. Gowan as a suitor for his daughter."

But Nigel, in high spirits, which were rare with him, would not see difficulties, would not believe in them when they were suggested, but persisted in looking on the bright side of things and in laughing at his mother's fears.

In particular he made light of the story about the stranger, who was said to have conversed with the parlourmaid that afternoon. Sidford, he pointed out, though the village was quite out of the beaten track, was not wholly unknown to tourists, who came, attracted by the fame of Sidford Castle, and who, when once settled at the inn in the village, made excursions all round, and were curious about everything and everybody. That the conversation of the stranger with their pretty parlourmaid was wholly unconnected with anything that need cause them alarm he felt sure.

Mrs. Blair, however, was not to be comforted: so, in order to reassure his mother, Nigel rang the bell for Andrews, and proceeded to interrogate her in Mrs. Blair's presence concerning her adventure of the afternoon.

"Now then, Andrews," said he to the pretty, dark-eyed young woman as soon as she appeared, "tell us all about the stranger. Who was this man who was so much interested in the place, and whom you saw talking to Potter?"

"I'm sure I don't know who he was, sir, except that he was a stranger and quite the gentleman. Oh, quite, sir! He was a little, slender

old gentleman, with silver hair and moustache, and very white slim hands. He had blue eyes, sir, and a very soft, slow way of speaking, so it was quite pleasant to listen to him, sir. Altogether a very nice old gentleman and nice-spoken. I think he must have been a friend of Lord St. Gowan's. He seemed to know all about him, and asked questions about his family."

While the girl was speaking the expression on the face of both mother and son had gradually changed. In the latter case the look of gaiety and elation faded out of the dark eyes, leaving the face stern and outwardly cold.

But the change in Mrs. Blair's face was greater still. The look of anxiety which had appeared in her eyes when the girl began her story gave place to one of acute distress, and no sooner had Andrews been dismissed than she flung herself into her son's arms and whispered—

"Nigel! Nigel! what do you think? Aren't you losing heart, too?"

It was in vain that the young man tried to comfort her; his tone and manner, indeed, belied the words in which he assured her that she was distressing herself without cause.

He told her that she was fanciful and sensitive, that she was excited, overwrought; that she saw everything through a distorted vision. She listened to him, shaking her head and clinging to his arm, staring out through the window at the waving trees which formed such a massive and imposing screen from the world outside.

Suddenly, as she gazed, her lips parted and a stifled cry escaped them.

"Look, look, Nigel!" she gasped.

Her son went nearer to the window and looked out.

Emerging from the avenue, the entrance to which was a perfect

archway under the trees, was a little masculine figure, spare, agile, yet not undignified withal. The stranger was dressed in a suit of light grey, to which something in his carriage and his looks gave distinction. Yet he was not handsome, according to strict canons, his profile being too strong as to nose and too weak as to chin, to satisfy the strict standard of masculine good looks, while his light eyes had no particular brilliancy or keenness of expression.

His moustache was white and well-trimmed, and so much of his hair as was visible under his cap was iron grey and cut very close. It was easy to guess that he had been in the army, and easier still to decide that he was a well-born and well-bred Englishman. The type betrayed him, and would have done so in any quarter of the globe.

As he slowly crossed the broad gravelled space in front of the house he looked up, taking a keen and careful survey of the building from end to end, noting the creeper that hung over its windows and the date carved over the doorway, noting, perhaps also, though of this they could not be sure, the two figures clinging together, silent, motionless, horror-struck, in the boudoir window.

Then, in the same leisurely manner, he passed out of their sight, making straight for the portico.

Mrs. Blair sank, trembling and white, into a chair.

"I told you so, I told you so," she murmured hoarsely. "I told you that it would come. I knew it, oh, I knew it!"

And Nigel, so eloquent, so full of sympathy and encouragement but a few moments before, had not a word to say. With his face drawn and old like that of an aged man he leaned against the window-sill, and tried to get one more look at the well-knit, lithe figure of the

unwelcome visitor. But it was too late: he had disappeared.

Without a word the young man sat down in his turn, and buried his face in his hands. The dead silence unbroken remained until both mother and son heard a footstep outside, when they hurriedly changed their attitudes, and tried to compose their countenances.

The next moment the footman entered, and said that a gentleman was in the drawing-room who wished to see Mrs. Blair.

The lady took the card from the salver with a hand which trembled in spite of herself. The name upon it was—

“Sir Robert Kerslake.”

CHAPTER III

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

MRS. BLAIR inclined her head without speaking when she had taken the card, and read the name upon it.

When the footman had retired, she turned to her son, pale, wild-eyed, despairing.

“Look!” she said. “Read this. He calls himself ‘Sir Robert Kerslake.’ What does it mean?”

Nigel, who had entirely recovered his self-possession, and who now nerved himself for another battle with adverse fate, as he had had to nerve himself often enough before, took the card from his mother’s hand and read the name on it with a puzzled frown. The address printed in the corner was that of one of the principal Paris hotels.

He sighed.

“I think I can tell you,” he said in a voice which sounded hard in spite of his efforts to keep it at a level tone of sympathetic gentleness

when talking to his mother. “It means that he is here with the intention of enjoying life to the full, of going to the best hotels, of spending money royally, of passing as a baronet, of making us support his pretensions, of squeezing out of us all that is to be squeezed, not only in money, but in credit, and presently of leaving us worn out, broken, exhausted in credit and in income, and unable to lift a finger in our own defence. That is what it means, mother, and we had better be prepared for the worst.”

Mrs. Blair, however, instead of looking grieved and sad at this terrible description of the evils in store for her, gradually assumed a rather happier aspect as she listened, until something like a faint smile appeared on her face as he finished.

“You think then,” said she, “that he *will* leave us?”

“Oh yes, undoubtedly. There is nothing to attract him here, is there? You know what his tastes and habits are. I ask you whether he will be at all inclined to settle down in this neighbourhood, where life is as still as a mill-pond, and where nothing in the way of distraction or amusement is to be obtained, nothing, that is to say, which he would call by the name of amusement?”

Mrs. Blair was still looking hopeful.

“Well,” she said, “if it is as you say, what does it matter how much money he wants? You need not let him know how much we have, and I’m sure we are quite ready to let him have all he can want, as long as he keeps away from us. But my fear is that he will not want to keep away.”

Nigel looked surprised.

“What does he care for a quiet life?” he asked.

“He might wish to try it for a change, or—to spite us,” said Mrs. Blair.

Nigel shook his head.

"I don't think it is likely. What I expect is that the bribe we have to give him to go away will exhaust our resources, and make it impossible for us to remain here."

"Well, that is impossible in any case—now, isn't it?" said she helplessly.

Nigel, who had been pale before, grew ghastly as he leaned against a high-backed chair near his mother, and hanging over it, gazed with a look of deepest agony into her face.

"Oh, mother," he said hoarsely, "if it comes to that, if all our work, all our patience must end like that, it will be more than I can bear."

And he covered his face with his hands, while his frame shook with irrepressible sobs. The transition from the joy and triumph of a few minutes before was overwhelming. His mother, recovering herself when she had to be consoler in her turn, rose quickly, and came across the room to him, tender, kind, gentle of touch and soothing of voice.

"No, no," she whispered, "Nothing that is good can be utterly thrown away. Nothing of your patience, your hard work, can really be lost altogether. As for what you have hoped, I think you deceived yourself. Here is the evidence of the fact. How could you, with this terrible secret to bear, have married Lord St. Gowan's daughter? Isn't it better that this blow should have come, and have prevented your bringing disgrace and ruin outside our own home?"

Nigel shivered under her words.

"Are you going to see him?" he asked suddenly.

"I must. How can I help it?"

"Hadn't you better leave it in my hands? Let me meet him, and make terms with him if I can."

She shook her head.

"I think," she said, "after—what happened, it may be wiser to let me meet him. He will scarcely dare to run the risk he ran before!"

As these words passed her lips, Mrs. Blair not only lowered her voice so that her words only just reached her son's ears, but she looked cautiously round her as if afraid that the very walls might hear what she said.

"What will you say?"

"I shall first try to find out what he proposes to do, and why he has come. Then I must learn, if I can, how he managed to find us out, lying hidden away here out of the world, where we thought we were quite safe! And—I must try to be calm, not to provoke him. But that is what I dread the most—that something in my face, my voice, may betray what I feel, and lead to another proof of his malice."

Nigel frowned.

"If only that fool Andrews hadn't been so ready to chatter!" said he.

Mrs. Blair smiled faintly.

"That made no difference. He had found out all that he wanted to know before he came down here. Of that I'm quite sure. Perhaps he has even dared to go to your solicitors."

"I scarcely think that. It is our safety that he has to keep underground. Even the assumption of a name which is not his own shows us that he recognizes the impossibility of appearing again under his own. We must play upon that knowledge of his, and above all we must not let him think we are afraid of him."

"I don't see how we can hide that," said Mrs. Blair. "I feel myself that I shall betray fear in every look, in every word, as soon as I am face to face with him."

Nigel sat silent, thinking over the danger which confronted them,

debating what course was the best to pursue.

"Perhaps," said he at last, "it will be best for you to see him first, and to find out whether he still feels the same bitterness as ever. Then I will see him, and try to make a bargain. It will be better for him as well as for us if he listens to reason. But that is what he never would do, isn't it?"

"Yes. One can only hope that time may have worked some change in him. But, oh, Nigel, it is an awful thing to have to meet him, to have to speak to him, remembering what I remember, knowing what I know!"

Again, as she stared out before her, some awful visions seemed to rise up before her eyes, and she suddenly covered them with a shudder.

"Don't think of it now," whispered her son, and he laid his hand upon her shoulder tenderly, as she walked slowly towards the door. "Try to keep only in the present, and to think only of the future, that future which depends so much upon him."

Mrs. Blair turned to him and embraced him silently, and then, supported on his arm, tottered slowly to the head of the stairs.

Down below, in the half light of the hall, which was generally dark on account of the thick growth of trees on this side of the house, she fancied she saw the door of the drawing-room closing slowly.

Standing still, and looking over the banisters, she was then sure that this was the case. And before she reached the stairs she saw that the door was softly closed.

Creeping step by step across the hall, she at last stood still before the door of the drawing-room, her fingers upon the handle, her heart beating so fast that she instinctively put her left hand up as if to restrain it. She seemed to hear it beating against her side while the blood

surged to her head, and she bravely fought with the horror of her situation.

The next moment she had mastered her emotion sufficiently to open the door, and walked in with dignified step and grave manner.

The long room was dark and cool, the three tall windows on the right-hand side being shaded by striped blinds, from under which a refreshing breeze blew in, causing the white lace curtains and the hangings of pale rose-coloured brocade to wave gently with a fan-like motion that kept the air cool and pleasant.

Through the open windows, too, there came a soothing sound of wind in the trees, a gentle rustling that harmonized well with the thoughts called up by the romantic situation of the house and grounds.

Perched among the low hills within sight and sound of the sea, Rock Hall might well have been thought to be out of reach of the turmoil of life, away from active enemies as well as the cares and strife of the outer world, and it struck even Mrs. Blair, overwhelmed as she was with emotions roused by the terrible interview before her, how strange it was that such a quiet and secluded spot should be the scene of such a meeting as that between her and her visitor.

The next moment the two had met.

The meeting was a strange one, all the more so for the absolute outward calmness which characterized it.

A quiet-looking, little elderly gentleman, well-bred of appearance, neat and well groomed, stepped back from the window at which he had been standing with his hands behind him and his cap in his hand, to make a low and courtly bow to the lady, which she returned with silent dignity.

And this before a word was exchanged between the two.

But while the stranger looked down, Mrs. Blair looked at him, and the mistrust which had characterized her look when she first met his eyes did not decrease when she noted how gentle and suave his manner was, how low was his bow, and how courteous was his bearing.

On the contrary, it seemed that she took these signs as portents of evil.

She did not utter a word, although he was evidently waiting for some sort of greeting. She stood like a queen in distress, reserved, cold, dignified, as Marie Antoinette might have stood before her accusers, without protest, without movement.

Her manner seemed, for perhaps half a second, to disconcert her courteous and bland visitor.

He glanced furtively at her, and then waved his right hand with a deprecatory air.

"I hope, madam," said he, "that you will not consider this visit an intrusion."

"It is unexpected," said Mrs. Blair gravely.

He looked up, facing her frankly and with a smile which was not without charm, or rather, which would have had charm but for a certain furtiveness which still lingered about the glance of the eyes.

"I hope not too unexpected to be welcome?"

To this she made no answer whatever. Her visitor, after standing silent a few moments, suddenly uttered a light laugh, and taking a chair which stood near him, offered it to his hostess.

"I mustn't keep you standing," he said.

But her reply was not conciliatory.

"I would rather stand, thank you," she said. "Please tell me what you have come for."

He sighed as he flirted with his

gloves, which he carried with his cap in his hands.

"You are not kind," he said. "Surely the circumstances of our old acquaintance——"

The face of the lady became at once convulsed with horror—irrepressible, tragic.

"Pray make no allusion to any circumstances but the present," she said hastily.

He remained perfectly good-humoured, and smiled again as he said:

"Just as you please. Still, as an old friend of your husband's——"

That phrase attracted her attention in the most startling fashion. She looked at him with a puzzled frown.

"I come here," he went on gently, "merely as an old friend of your husband's, and of course of yours, to see you, to ask after your children——"

Again her face contracted with pain, and she threw at him a look of such deep bitterness that he chose not to meet it.

"We are all quite well," she said in a sort of breathless voice. "You might have found out that, and anything else you wished to know, without coming here, Sir Robert Kerslake."

She put a certain stress on the title and the name, and her visitor looked for a moment quite pleased.

"Ah! Did you know who that was? Title self-conferred, but very appropriate, don't you think so?"

His tone was genial, almost flippant.

"I should have thought, if you really care to know what I think, that it would have been better not to bear a title at all."

"Ah! There's the difference between you and me, dear Mrs.—Mrs.—What is it you call yourself?"

She glanced quickly round her,

at the door, the windows, as if fearful of being overheard.

"My name is Blair," she said.

"Blair. Ah! And what made you choose the name of Blair? Or is it a liberty to ask? For I wouldn't take a liberty for the world. My objects are, if not purely philanthropic—perhaps that is too much to say—at least purely friendly, as long as I am received in a proper manner." There was a tone of subdued menace under these words which the unfortunate woman did not fail to notice. "Now, why Blair? It is a Scotch name, and I hate everything from Scotland, except its salmon and its cakes. Why Blair, Mrs.—er—Blair?"

The lady answered stiffly.

"Surely I was at liberty to take any name I pleased, since it was impossible for me to use my own any longer?"

"Why impossible? I see no necessity that you were under to change it!"

"Don't you? Then I'm afraid, if you don't, I can't make you see my reasons. But we need not dispute about it."

"Dispute! Of course not. It is you, dear Mrs. Blair, who are assuming a disputatious attitude. I am perfectly conciliatory, and mean to be. Now please tell me something about your circumstances. You seem to be very well lodged here. Doing well, I suppose?"

"We have had a very hard struggle," she began.

"But have got through it, I can see," added he promptly. "Well, we all become more interesting for a little hard luck in the course of our lives, don't we? And it is something to be able to say that one's troubles are over. Is it a liberty to take if I ask how much you put your present income at?"

Mrs. Blair hesitated.

"The lawyers could tell you that better than I can," she said.

"The lawyers! Really! I shouldn't have thought anybody could have answered such a question so well as yourself. May I make a guess?"

"I could scarcely answer you myself. I am not very strong, as you can see. Details of all sorts I leave to others—now."

"And a very good plan, too, to lay all your burdens on the shoulders of others. I am quite willing you should lay some of them on mine."

She gave him a furtive glance of horror, and he went on:

"May I hazard a conjecture that your property brings you in some two thousand a year?"

"I don't think it can be so much as that," faltered Mrs. Blair.

"Well, the exact amount can be ascertained, no doubt," said he, with at least a distinct shade of menace in his tone. "It is always best to be exact, and I must tell you that I mean to have an answer, a true answer, on that point, and on several others. You can't dispute my right, I think?"

"There are others who have rights," she said.

"What others?"

"My son, in the first place, to whom it is owing that there is any income at all. You know best that twenty years ago there was none."

"I know the property was in hands too generous, and that a stingier *régime* might have done it good," said Sir Robert. "Perhaps the present *régime* is a saving one? Well, you need not answer me now. I shall certainly see these lawyers, if you would rather not give me satisfactory answers yourself, and I shall certainly require something more than an answer from them, Mrs. Blair."

"Oh, of course," said she helplessly.

"In the meantime I'm sure you will have no objection to my seeing your son and daughter. I understand that you have a son and a daughter, both grown up."

"Yes. But I hope you will not press the point. See Nigel, my son, if you will. But my daughter knows nothing, and the sight of you might lead to her asking questions——"

"Which I am quite sure you would be clever enough to answer, Mrs. Blair."

"Can't you see—surely you must see, that the fewer the questions asked the better it will be?" asked Mrs. Blair, breaking through her manner of icy reserve, and growing passionate in argument, in entreaty.

Sir Robert looked bland but obstinate.

"Indeed I can't see that a few questions asked and answered would injure any one. On the contrary. As you must have had considerable difficulty in establishing yourself here under a name which is not your own, I think to have it known that you have a few decent-looking and decently-dressed friends will be rather an advantage."

She stared at him as if in helpless surprise at his confident impudence.

When she had recovered breath to speak she said earnestly:

"Whatever difficulties of that sort we may have had, and I don't deny we had some, we have conquered them, lived them down. We have succeeded in establishing ourselves; we have made for ourselves a new identity. What good can it do to disturb us now? It is inhuman, and—will it do you any good?"

"I must be allowed to answer that question for myself," said he smiling. "I see you live close to Sidford Castle and the St. Gowan. Are you on intimate terms with them?"

Mrs. Blair hesitated. She would

not for the world have confessed how intimate the friendship between the two households was, but on the other hand she thought she might use the viscount as a handle for the removal of her undesirable guest.

"You knew Lord St. Gowan yourself once," she said, looking at him steadily. "Would you care to meet him again?"

At that question there flashed out suddenly from under the calm, bland, gentle exterior of the visitor such a malignant look of rage and mortification as would have alarmed any person who was unacquainted with him and with his idiosyncrasies. Even Mrs. Blair, though she was not unprepared for some such demonstration, quailed under it as he raised his clenched fist, and hissed out the words:

"You she-devil!"

But if she quailed, she recovered herself quickly. And, standing in an attitude of readiness, almost as if she expected a blow, she looked at him askance with watchful eyes full of veiled apprehension.

Putting strong constraint upon himself, the visitor let his arm fall to his side, and assuming a tone which was intended to imply that he had spoken in jest, he said quite mildly:

"One doesn't care always to meet one's old friends after a lapse of years. There is so much to be forgotten on both sides, so much that is unknown to each: it is like making an acquaintance over again. No, for my part I generally avoid all old acquaintances of whom I have lost sight for any number of years exceeding two or three."

She bowed her head in assent. Then he went on:

"You haven't answered my question. Are you intimate with the St. Gowan?"

She evaded a direct reply.

"How can you expect intimacy

between the family of a man of rank and people in our equivocal and embarrassing position?"

"I don't see why it should be embarrassing. You are of gentle birth and breeding, that is patent to the meanest intelligence. You are beautiful still, Mrs. Blair, and I have no doubt your daughter is a good-looking young woman."

At the mention of her daughter the poor lady's face grew dark with fresh distress. The visitor seemed to guess what fears were in her mind, for he said gently:

"However lovely she may be, she could not well be in better hands than yours. But is it well for the girl's chances that she should be buried here? Or have you, with the discerning mother's eye, found that this is not such an unpropitious place for a good match after all?"

Mrs. Blair answered with great eagerness:

"There is no need to think of such things yet. My daughter is young."

Then, in the same easy, gentle way, he let slip the suggestive words:

"Young, yes. And—so is Lord St. Gowan's son."

She threw one quick glance at him and understood that, either from Andrews or some one of the village gossips, her dreaded visitor had managed to acquaint himself with many more details than she had supposed.

She turned the conversation.

"Have you been in England long?" she asked.

He waved away the inquiry.

"I don't suppose you are very anxious to know where I've been or what I've been doing. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof, and at present I can see that your only care is to get rid of me. But I'm not going away without having seen your children. Introduce me as Sir Robert Kerslake. I suppose

they have never heard of Sir Robert?"

She looked down.

"Nigel," she said in a low voice, "has heard everything. How could it be avoided?"

"Ah!" said Sir Robert, in a voice which made Mrs. Blair tremble.

Not that it was loud; on the contrary, it was scarcely more than a whisper. But there was in its soft tone a concentrated malignity, a subdued ferocity, which made her feel sick as she listened.

There was a long silence. Then he said, in his ordinary, courteous tones:

"And now may I beg to be introduced to the young people?"

"I will send Nigel to you," she said.

And without waiting for further discussion of that other point, the introduction of her daughter, she went out of the room.

Nigel had come downstairs, and was waiting for her at the door of the dining-room, on the other side of the hall. She would not speak to him there, but, laying her finger on her lip, led the way upstairs again. She remembered that she had seen the drawing-room door ajar, and she feared that, if she were to speak to her son on the ground-floor of the house, they might be overheard by the subject of their talk.

When they reached her boudoir, however, she was at first incapable of speech. She burst into tears, and sobbed for some minutes before her son could draw from her a connected account of the interview.

Then she looked up and dashed away her tears.

"Nigel," she said, "it's of no use to pretend not to know. We must prepare for the worst. He has come to ruin us, and he will manage it. He looked so suave, so gentle at first, that even I, who remember the old days so well,

began to be deceived and to think that time had altered and softened him. But he's just the same."

Nigel was standing stiff and straight, between his mother and the door. He was anxious to begin the battle at once, and his burning eyes, and face pallid with suppressed passion, showed that he was eager for the fray.

"Did he threaten?"

"No. He did worse. He fawned. He tried to flatter me. That was always a bad sign with him: now I feel it's fatal. He wants to see Meg. Prevent it if you can."

Nigel shrugged his shoulders.

"How can I?" said he. "You know very well that we are in his power, not he in ours. Whatever he chooses to do he will do, and all that is left to us is to make the best terms we can. From what you say I think those terms will be equivalent to ruin."

"We shall have to go away," she said.

Nigel revolted.

"No," he said. "That must be avoided, at all hazards. After all, haven't I any rights? Besides, perhaps we're not so wholly in his power as you think. From his having changed his name it's evident he means to keep underground."

"Yes. He said, when talking of Lord St. Gowan, that he never attempts to renew an old acquaintanceship. I took that as a good sign."

"It is, it is. Perhaps he means to go away at once, when he's levied toll to the amount he wants."

Mrs. Blair looked perturbed.

"Surely," she said, "you never contemplated his wanting to stay here?"

"Well, I should like to hear what he says about it," said Nigel dubiously. "I thought at first, as you say, that he would find nothing here to suit his tastes. But on second thoughts I'm not so sure.

Since he has buried his identity, as we have ours, he might choose to take to new pursuits. But we won't meet trouble half-way. I'll go and hear what he has to say."

He went downstairs, and opened the door of the drawing-room. The dim light which came through the sun-blinds, tempered by the soft green of the trees, filled the long apartment with a subdued atmosphere, mysterious, cool, pleasant. Nigel advanced into the room, looked round him, looked behind the tall Louis Quinze screen, into the recesses of the windows.

There was no one there!

He went through the doorway, hung with soft hangings of rose-tinted brocade, into the second drawing-room, which opened by French windows on to the lawn. This room was lighter, brighter, homelier than the other, and was the one most used by the family, signs of whose occupation were visible in the open piano, the half-read book lying on a sofa among disarranged cushions.

Nigel looked round him once more in vain. The room was unoccupied.

He hurried across to the window and looked out. But there was no sign of the stranger to be seen, and, with a sigh of relief, he thought that perhaps Sir Robert Kerslake, discomfited by the coolness of his reception, might have taken himself off, resolved to effect his purpose of obtaining supplies through other channels and by other means.

Much relieved as this suggestion entered his mind, the young man ran lightly upstairs again, to tell his mother of his gratifying discovery.

But he rejoiced too soon.

At some distance from the lawn, its flower-beds and its trees, hidden from the view of the occupants of the house by the trees which surrounded it on all sides but one, was a pleasant little nook, a cleft in the cliff long since filled in and over-

grown with shrubs and bushes, where a rustic seat had been placed in such a position that any one sitting on it could obtain a full view of the sea in a sort of frame of foliage and verdure.

This was a favourite spot with Margaret Blair; and when her mother went indoors, after the departure of Auckland St. Gowan, the girl, accompanied by the Aberdeen terrier, Poppie, strolled along the winding walk till she reached this nook and, seating herself on the rustic bench, stared out at the sea in a very depressed and despondent mood.

Several things had conduced to bring about this unusual circumstance with her. In the first place she had been pained by the words her mother had used on first seeing Auckland St. Gowan as he came out of the house. The manner and voice with which Mrs. Blair had spoken of their visitor, of his not being "steady," remained in her recollection and caused her considerable distress.

She liked Auckland St. Gowan; she liked him very much indeed, and though she had never carefully analysed her feelings with regard to him, she was quite conscious, especially when an incident of this sort stirred her emotions, that she should miss him very much indeed, if ever he were to go away altogether from his Devonshire home.

The young man indeed had on his side shown the most faithful spirit, and especially of late, had lost no opportunity of getting leave from his regiment to come home and pay his dutiful respects to his parents. And on these occasions he always remembered his duty to his friends also, and never failed to turn up day after day at Rock Hall to inquire after Mrs. Blair's health, as long as his visit lasted.

He did not trouble himself very greatly as to the depth of the feeling which drew him like a magnet in the

direction of the modest mansion on the cliff. But other people interested themselves in the affair, and had no difficulty in deciding that the young son of Viscount St. Gowan was in love with beautiful Margaret Blair.

Now, Margaret had often heard rumours as to Auckland's "wildness," about his debts and his bets, his bridge-playing, and the prices he paid for his polo ponies. But she had never believed a word against him, and if she had been questioned as to her views, would probably have said that she supposed a certain amount of what other people looked upon as extravagance was expected in a nobleman's son, and she would have been very angry at the suggestion that there was any harm in it.

Now, therefore, this sudden hint of her mother's that there was blame to be cast upon Auckland distressed and even puzzled the girl.

Then, again, she had been irritated afresh, as she had been so many times before, by that mystery about themselves which Mrs. Blair had never cleared up for her, and by the fact that Auckland's innocent questions had opened the wound again.

And the third cause of distress was the effect produced upon her mother by the news that a stranger had been making inquiries about them in the village.

If there was nothing to be ashamed of in their own history, as she had always been led to suppose, how was it that her mother was so greatly perturbed on hearing of the questioning, curious stranger?

These things worried the girl, and as she sat back in the seat, watching the rippling, sparkling sea through half-closed eyelids, her heart was heavy within her.

Those visits of Auckland were so pleasant; those brief snatches of talk when they met on their morn-

ing ride were so exhilarating, left such a sense of freshness and merriment behind! And she began vaguely to feel that these talks would end, that these pleasant interviews would be over before long, unless they could meet on a more frank level, and unless she on her side and Nigel on his could bring forward some family history to show against that of the viscount's children.

It was humiliating to know nothing about oneself; to look into book after book in the library, only to find that the bookplate had been carefully removed; to see that there was a hollow on the forks and spoons where she suspected that a fresh monogram had been substituted for that originally there; to ask questions about things in the house that looked like heirlooms, only to learn that they had belonged to a "distant branch of the family."

Family! What family?

Margaret burned to know. Nigel knew more than she did, of that she felt sure—Nigel, whose business was so mysterious, whose absences were so long and so regular; Nigel, who had nothing to tell about his daily doings or adventures when he came back.

She was absorbed in these thoughts, with which was mingled a goodly measure of strong discontent, when she heard footsteps behind her, and turning startled, found herself in the presence of a good-looking, well-dressed elderly gentleman, who raised his hat to her, and with a pleasant smile said:

"Forgive me if I am intruding, but have I not the pleasure of speaking to Miss Blair?"

"Yes," said Margaret, her eyes bright with interest and a strange feeling of curiosity, as she rose, smiling, and quieted Poppie, who barked furiously at the stranger and would not be quieted.

The gentleman came forward and held out his hand.

"You don't know me, I'm sure," said he, as Margaret, fascinated and attracted by the charming manners of the stranger, at once gave him her hand, "but I'm a very old friend of your father's, and of your family. In fact I'm a distant relation myself. Did you ever hear of Sir Robert Kerslake?"

"No, never, I think," said Margaret, her curiosity and interest excited to the highest pitch by the prospect so abruptly and so opportunely held out of learning something about herself and her people at last. "But oh, I'm so glad to meet you! I will take you to the house. It is my mother you want to see, isn't it?"

"I've had that pleasure already," said Sir Robert, as he looked at her with a pleased look of courteous admiration and delight. "It's your mother's daughter whose acquaintance I want to make now." Margaret laughed.

"It's very nice of you to say so," said she; "and you will be doubly welcome if you can talk to me about my people. I know so little about them, and I want to know so much. My mother is delicate, as I dare say you know, and it fatigues her to talk much. But I love nothing so much as to hear all about her and my father and their friends when they were young."

A curious smile played over the stranger's face as a cry, in a woman's voice, made them look quickly round.

CHAPTER IV

MYSTERY IN THE AIR

WHEN Sir Robert Kerslake looked behind him on hearing the cry, Meg sprang to her feet.

Both were in time to catch a glimpse of a woman's face as it was withdrawn quickly from behind the bushes which made a thick screen at a little distance from the rustic seat. Sir Robert and the girl glanced at each other, as the parted bushes fell together with a slight rustling noise, and continued to sway to and fro for some moments after the disappearance of the face.

The stranger smiled with amusement and surprise.

"Who was the lady?" he asked lightly. "And what were we doing to alarm her?"

Margaret looked more puzzled than lie.

"It's one of the servants," she said. "I'm almost sure it was Maguire, the head housemaid. But I can't understand what she was doing out here."

"I must have frightened her, I suppose," said Sir Robert perplexed.

An idea struck Margaret.

"Perhaps she recognized you?" she suggested. "You are an old friend of the family, aren't you? Perhaps she's seen you before. Of course it was most impertinent of her to follow you out here, and quite unlike her, for she's a steady old servant. But we have so few visitors that I suppose curiosity got the better of her good manners."

Sir Robert Kerslake was frowning slightly, as if trying to recollect something.

"Maguire, Maguire!" he repeated. "It's a long time, certainly, since I stayed with your people, but I have a very good memory, and I don't recollect the name. Has the woman been long with you?"

"Six or seven years."

Sir Robert raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Oh, that is modern history with which I have nothing to do. My acquaintance with your people is of far older date than that, quite twenty years back. I haven't seen

your mother since your father died."

Margaret's face was alight with eager interest.

"Then you can tell me something about him, something about all the family," she said breathlessly. "Oh, I'm so glad."

Sir Robert, however, looked at her so keenly when she said this that she recollected the fact that her eagerness must seem strange to him, must seem even to cast some sort of slur on her mother, whose reticence, unexplained, must be amazing to him.

"Would you mind," he asked gently, "if I were first to pursue this young person and find out, if I could, why she was so much alarmed at the sight of me? I'm quite sure she can never have seen me before, so her curiosity seems extraordinary, and very unusual in a well-bred servant."

Margaret directed him to a little opening among the bushes, and said:

"There is a path which leads to the kitchen garden, and that must have been the way by which she came. If you go straight on I think you can scarcely fail to catch up with her before she gets back to the house."

"Thank you very much. You'll excuse my going away so abruptly. I'll come back and shall be delighted to tell all you want to know. But this woman's conduct is really so extraordinary that I should like to find out the meaning of it."

He raised his cap with the same charming courtliness which had distinguished his manner throughout the interview, and disappeared quickly in the direction she pointed out.

Sir Robert, though he could scarcely have been much less than sixty years of age, was remarkably agile, and when once the bushes screened him from the watching eyes of the young girl, he ran along the

path as if he had been five and twenty.

It was one of the charms of the beautiful grounds which surrounded Rock Hall that unexpected pathways and pleasing little nooks were to be found in all directions. The walk in question was between high hedges, and wound about so much that the end of it came quite suddenly, and he found himself in front of a little wooden door in a high red wall, which was covered with creepers almost to its summit.

Sir Robert was an Englishman who had lived long abroad, and he was so much charmed by the luxuriant growth of rose trees and clematis, wisteria and jasmine, that for a moment he paused in his pursuit, struck with admiration of the pretty corner upon which he had come so unexpectedly.

The afternoon sun shone full upon the wall, showed gleams of mellow red brick between clusters of glossy green leaves and masses of blossom. Purple and white, delicate tints of rose, mingled with the dainty mauve of the wisteria, and presented such a feast to the eye, such intoxicating perfume to the sense of smell, that for a moment he did not even notice the fact that the green door in the wall was on the latch, and that a crunching of gravel on the other side betrayed the presence of a human being not many feet away.

Sir Robert woke suddenly to a consciousness of these incidents, and pushing the door, looked through into an old-fashioned kitchen-garden where fruit trees and vegetables, strawberry beds and currant bushes, formed a picture as homely as it was appetising.

He passed through, and found himself on the gravel walk of a very large garden, with cherries and peaches, plums and greengages growing on the tall red walls, while apple and pear trees occupied the middle of some of the great square

beds, and grew, espalier fashion, round others.

Close against one wall, her right arm half buried in a cherry-tree, was the curious housemaid, very neat in her black dress, smart cap, and picturesque apron.

Maguire, whose Irish origin was betrayed by her features, was a thick-set woman of middle height, not much under forty years of age, conventionally prim and sedate-looking until she opened her mouth, when a slight inclination to loquacity at once distinguished her from the ordinary Anglo-Saxon servant of the better class. Sir Robert Kerslake, who had pursued her with curiosity, met her with surprise. For he was quite sure, having an excellent memory for faces, that he had never seen the woman before.

She seemed confused at the meeting, returned hastily to the path from the middle of the border where she was standing, and made an attempt at a rapid escape.

But Sir Robert was too quick for her, and, much to her surprise, she found herself a prisoner in the grip of the courteous gentleman who, grasping her wrist like a vice, said in the blandest and mildest of voices:

"Come, I want a word with you, please."

The woman was surveying him stealthily even while she laughed in confusion and broke out into elaborate apologies.

"Sure, sir, and I must make my apologies to you, sir, for coming upon you and Miss Margaret unawares and calling out as I did. It's asking your pardon, sir, for what looked like taking a liberty, but it was not so, indeed, sir. I was out in the grounds, not knowing that Miss Margaret was on the seat in the shrubbery, and when I found myself all on a sudden close to her and to you, sir, why, I was so upset, sir, that I cried out."

Even while she poured out her

pointless harangue in the softest and most conciliatory of tones, with a slight brogue not unpleasant to listen to, Sir Robert noticed that she surveyed him with keen eyes, as if satisfying to the full whatever curiosity might have possessed her at the outset respecting him. And there was more than curiosity in her eyes; there was cunning. And Sir Robert, who was a man of experience, recognized that it would be as well to have this apologetic, humble, but keen-eyed person on his side.

It was, therefore, in the softest and most winning of voices that he answered her, smiling amiably the while, and treating her with as much courtesy as if she had been a lady.

"But there was nothing to be upset about, you know. Your appearance has nothing in it so alarming that I should be unnerved by the sight of you. From the Emerald Isle, I fancy, eh, Maguire?"

"Yes, sir, I'm an Irishwoman. I hope there's no harm in that, sir."

"No the least. Quite the other way. I've always admired Irish women. They're good friends."

"Yes, sir, sure you're right there. We've soft hearts of our own."

"And discreet tongues, when it concerns our friends, eh?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I'm discreet enough, barring I'm a little too quick at crying out, perhaps, when I think I've made a discovery."

And she looked at him quickly, and then looked down, betraying that she knew or had guessed something.

"And pray, Maguire, what discovery is it you think you have made?" asked he good-humouredly, though there was, perhaps, anxiety in the expression of his eyes.

She hesitated.

"Well, sir," she said at last, "maybe I'm too forward in saying that. I only meant, sir, that I've seen a likeness of you about the house—servants see a good deal that they're not supposed to see, as

I dare say you know, sir—and that the name upon it was not one I'd heard before, sir, at least, not since I've been in this service."

Sir Robert had let her go, abruptly. She did not run away, but stood in an attitude which was half timorous, half defiant, as if anxious about the result of this plain speaking.

For its effect upon the visitor showed that it was speaking of the very plainest kind. For a moment the fresh colour died out of his cheeks, and left them pallid and almost grey. Then recovering himself, he smiled with an effort, and said:

"You've made a mistake, my good girl. It was not my portrait you saw; it could not have been, but that of a distant relation of mine, who was also a relation of the people in whose service you now are."

He paused, as if expecting her to make some comment. But she made none. Instead, she looked down on the gravel, with a perfectly expressionless face, as blank as one of those of her Anglo-Saxon fellow-servants could have been. He looked at her, saw cunning in the face, and frowned in a fashion which would probably have alarmed her if she had glanced up at the moment. He put his right hand into his breast-pocket, and as if unconsciously jingled some coins in it: the sound was unmistakably that of the clinking of gold pieces. The woman's eyes brightened. That was a language she understood.

"I should'n't like to think," he said after a rather long pause, "that anybody even suspected the connexion between me and the person whose portrait you saw. Perhaps, of course, I'm wrong in thinking it was the picture of one particular person?"

"There are two portraits about, sir, of the gentleman I mean," said Maguire promptly. "The one is a

little painted picture, shaped like an egg——"

"An oval miniature, I suppose you mean?"

"That's it, sir, no doubt. It was of a gentleman and a boy."

He nodded, but the colour had not yet come back to his face. It almost seemed as if the little blood behind the skin went out of the face, and left it more ghastly than before.

"And the other," went on the woman, "was a small photograph—what they used to call *carte-de-visite*, sir—of a gentleman leaning against a column, with flowers and trees in the background."

If the visitor had been disconcerted, he had recovered himself.

"That's the one," he said imperturbably. "They are both of a man who was my third cousin."

"Yes, sir," answered the woman with her eyes down.

If they had not been lowered, probably she would have been surprised at the expression of veiled menace in the eyes of the bland and courteous gentleman.

"Well," he said, after a pause, "it's curious that you should have supposed the pictures you saw were of me. For my cousin, the man in the *carte-de-visite* and the miniature is dead."

"Indeed, sir."

"Yes, and forgotten. Some said he deserved to be forgotten. But it was rather hard. He was not really a bad sort, whatever people may have said. He was badly treated, and he resented it. And—a good deal of what was supposed to be done of malice, was—accidental—quite."

"Yes, sir."

"And look here, my girl," and Sir Robert, descending suddenly into a familiarity which was yet not wholly undignified, touched her lightly on the arm, "don't join the chorus of blame for his memory, if ever you should chance to hear it sung. Believe me, there's much more good

in some of the so-called sinners than in a whole army of saints. My poor cousin is dead now, and nothing that is said about him can hurt him." Maguire looked up quickly, and looked down. His hand went into his pocket again. "But still I must say I hate to hear him run down; and if you'll promise me to say a good word for him when you hear him blamed, and if you won't say anything about those pictures to anybody—nor about the original if you can help it, why, you shall find a grateful friend in me, I can assure you. And here's something to remember me by. I'm sure my cousin would have done as much if he'd been alive and here at this moment."

He took out of his pocket a couple of sovereigns, cast at them furtively a glance which was perhaps rather regretful and lingering, and pressed them into her hand with a smile which was worth more than the money as far as the earning of grateful silence went.

Maguire accepted the gift with effusion, assured the visitor of her obedience to his wishes, and dropped him a little curtsey, and a reminiscence of her school-days perhaps, or an acknowledgment of an unusual act of generosity.

"And now," he said, "I must go back to Miss Blair. She will be surprised at my leaving her for so long. I've promised to tell her something about her own people. I hear that she has been brought up in almost complete ignorance concerning them."

Maguire nodded.

"Yes, sir. And there's not a soul about the place knows more about herself than she does, barring it's Mrs. Blair and Mr. Nigel. It's a queer household, sir, as you'll find out if you are going to stay here."

"And what makes you think that?" asked Sir Robert.

The woman laughed shyly, and

involuntarily glanced at the coins through her fingers.

He laughed softly.

"Well, if I should be staying here, Maguire," he said in the same pleasant, caressing voice as ever, "at any rate I shall know I have one friend about the place, the woman who had a good word for my poor cousin."

She looked up askance, and smiled demurely.

"Yes, sir," said she, as he turned away.

Sir Robert hurried back through the doorway in the high red wall, and lost no time in returning to the seat in the shrubbery, where he found Margaret waiting impatiently for him.

The girl, who was seated, was watching the little opening through the shrubs, and at sight of him she uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

Sir Robert came eagerly forward and sat down beside her.

"Well, did you find Maguire?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh, yes, I found her, just as you had said. She was in the very prettiest kitchen-garden I ever saw in my life. To tell you the truth, I was so much charmed with the outside wall of it that I stood smelling the roses and the jasmine instead of looking for the maid. This is a most lovely spot, Miss Blair, and quite a fitting nest for a lovely girl."

She blushed and laughed.

"Oh, don't let us waste precious time in paying and listening to compliments," she said. "In a few minutes my mother and brother may follow you out here, and then I shall have to take a back seat, and to listen while you talk to them."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"What! Are you a Cinderella then? I shouldn't have thought it," said he.

Margaret looked rather guilty at the question.

"No, no, I don't mean that

exactly. But—I can tell you, can't I?—since you knew my father and have known my people so long——"

She had suddenly been seized, apparently, with a suspicion that she was being franker than is usual with a stranger. His gentle manner and winning smile, however, reassured her.

"My dear Miss Blair," he said, "it doesn't matter in the least what you confess to me. I'm an old fogey, and you've made me feel like an old friend. And indeed I am an old friend of the family, one of the oldest they've got."

A sudden thought crossed Margaret's mind, and made her sit back and look at him with keen scrutiny.

"Were they glad to see you, my mother and Nigel?" she asked peremptorily.

Her new friend looked at her with a quizzical expression of face.

"I had better tell the truth," he murmured humorously, as if to himself, "though goodness only knows what the result will be!" Then, raising his voice a little, he said:

"Well, no, I must frankly confess that Mrs. Blair was not pleased to see me, not at all pleased. She looked as if she would have ordered me out of the house if she'd dared."

"And Nigel?"

"Your brother? Ah, I haven't seen him yet."

Margaret was interested.

"Why——" Then she stopped and blushed and laughed a little, in pretty confusion. "You will think me very rude," she said, "to ask so many questions."

But Sir Robert replied promptly:

"Not at all. I would rather have to answer a dozen than be received as I was by your mother, as if my visit were an intrusion. And it really isn't quite fair, for I am a relative of her husband's and therefore of hers, and I cannot help taking a great interest in the wife

and children of my old friend and comrade."

"You knew my father well?"

"Very well indeed. Poor fellow!"

"You will tell me about him?" she went on eagerly.

He hesitated, and looked gravely into her face. At last he said:

"I *could* tell you about him—I suppose I could tell you more about him indeed than almost any man living. But whether it would be wise to do so is another matter."

"What harm could there be in my hearing about my own father?"

"Well, there were dissensions. I took his part, and I scarcely think it would be well for you to hear my version of the story, if, as you say, you have been allowed to hear none."

"I don't agree with you; I can't. Surely I have a right to know something about my people, I, a girl of two and twenty! I resent very much the attitude of my mother and brother in keeping me quite in the dark, and I should be very grateful indeed to you if you would tell me what I am sure you will confess I have a right to know."

"A right, yes. The question is whether it will not make you unhappy to hear of quarrels, dissensions, troubles about which you now know nothing. I think myself that ignorance may be a happier state than full knowledge. Especially as, hearing the story for the first time from an active and hearty partisan of the one side, as I confess myself to be, you might conceivably be made unhappy by taking the same view as I take, one which throws blame upon the living."

The girl was listening to him with a face full of deep emotion. Thoroughly stirred and excited by the prospect of having her eager curiosity and interest satisfied at last, she would not heed objections of this kind.

"Well," she said, "we must risk that, we must risk everything. Let me hear what you have to tell, and I can decide for myself what to do, whether to look upon my mother and brother as justified or not for their silence."

Sir Robert was studying her face with keen eyes.

"May I take it," he asked gently, after a short pause, "that you are not quite happy, not quite congenially placed, in your home life? You won't think me impertinent, I'm sure. But I feel myself on delicate ground in coming to disturb your outlook, as my story is bound to do."

Margaret frowned slightly.

"I am certainly not miserable," she said. "My mother and brother are kind and affectionate, and do all in their power to make me perfectly happy. At the same time it is quite true that I rather resent being kept so much in the dark that I don't even know anything about my own relations, and now that I have the pleasure of meeting one of them"—and she smiled gaily into the old gentleman's face—"can't help reproaching them for not having let me know more of them."

"That's very nice of you," said Sir Robert. "Well then, in fear and trembling, I'll begin. I knew your father when he and I were in the same regiment as subalterns. He wasn't a bad fellow, but hot-tempered and passionate. I'll make the story as brief as I can, and won't go into details. He fell in love with, and married, a most beautiful woman—your mother. She was exceedingly lovely, and if you want to know what she looked like, may I suggest that you should take a peep in the next mirror you pass, and you will have your curiosity fully satisfied?"

Margaret smiled, blushed, and looked down. The visitor did not flatter her. She was looking, at that moment, as perfect a specimen

of a handsome young English-woman as it is possible to find.

Sir Robert went on:

"Your father adored her, as you will be adored, if you are not in that delightful position already," he added with demure mischief, bringing another blush to the girl's cheeks. "I suppose it would be idle to pretend that she cared as much for him as he did for her. The knowledge that she was cold, always cold, repelled him, perhaps caused him to show resentment in an unwise manner. At any rate there were dissensions, and these culminated in his becoming wildly jealous. There were quarrels; your brother, young as he then was, not more than twelve years of age, I should think, took his mother's part strongly against his father, thus adding fuel to the flames. Then there was a stormy outburst, which threatened a scandal, and your father went out of his mind. He was confined as a lunatic for some years before he died. Have I given you horrors enough? I hope you don't hate me for spoiling your peace, as part of my story must have spoilt it."

Margaret shook her head gravely.

"No," she said in a low voice. "S Dreadful as it is to hear, I am glad to have heard it. Anything was better than dense ignorance of everything. And now can you do anything else for me? Can you show me a portrait of my father?"

"I have one somewhere," said Sir Robert. "But it is warehoused with my furniture. I have lived out of England for many years, and I am at present without a home."

"Tell me what he was like," said Margaret.

He considered.

"There was nothing very salient about him to describe. At the time of his death he was prematurely aged, and I should not have recognized him as the smart, well set-up young officer he was in his

youth. But he was not much taller than I am, fair rather than dark, and slightly built."

Margaret bent her head in acknowledgment of the information.

"Now that I know so much," she said, "I shall challenge my brother and get him to tell me more."

"He will prevaricate, put you off, and finally tell you the story from his point of view, which is not the same as mine," said Sir Robert. "You will have to make allowance for prejudice—on both sides," he added candidly.

"Yes, yes, I know," said she.

"Pardon my asking you, but do you get on well with your mother and brother? It seemed to me, if I may hazard such an opinion, that Mrs. Blair is soured, saddened, and too grave to have much sympathy with a lively young girl. I hope it is not presumptuous to suggest that she may suffer some remorse now for the coldness which affected her husband so much, and which did undoubtedly hasten the unhappy catastrophe which ruined him."

"What catastrophe?"

"His madness."

"Oh, yes. I dare say it does affect her. And Nigel too. He is even more solemn than my mother, I think."

"I am anxious to see him. Though I am afraid he will receive me with no more warmth than Mrs. Blair did, and for the same reason. He always took his mother's part, and I must say I like that in a lad. But the father and husband had to suffer in double measure from the circumstance."

"Nigel is a puzzle to me," said Margaret, who was completely won over by the charming manners of the visitor as well as by his confidences. "He is very reserved, and he seems to resent any questions one may ask about his affairs, his frequent journeys away, as if

one had no right to be interested in one's own brother."

"Journeys!" exclaimed Sir Robert. "Where does he go?"

Margaret blushed, conscious that she had committed an indiscretion.

"That's the puzzling part of it," she answered, "that he won't even let me know where he goes, or why. If I ask, I am shut up curtly with the reply that he was away on business. As if he were a commercial traveller!" added she derisively.

The visitor was evidently much interested in this information.

"I certainly think it is not right to be so very reticent," he said.

"No doubt his motives are good; but I can understand the painful feeling it must rouse in you to be treated as if you were a child when I'm quite sure from the manner in which you have listened to me and heard what I had to tell, that you are a young lady of considerable intelligence and fully worthy to be taken into the family confidence."

"I do think I am," said Margaret earnestly. "For indeed I would be as reserved as they could wish, if only they were to let me know what was to be kept undiscussed, and why. And I am deeply grateful to you, Sir Robert, for having told me what you have done."

As she ceased speaking, they both heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and turning quickly to her companion, the girl said:

"Here comes my brother, I think."

Sir Robert looked keenly alert and interested at once, and in another moment the bushes were roughly pulled aside, and Nigel Blair came out into the open space before the seat.

Margaret's heart seemed to stand still as the two men met.

For she saw in a moment that the look exchanged between the two was one of acute antagonism, and at once it occurred to her that she had been rash in opening her heart

as she had done to the stranger.

Not that the sympathy between her and her brother was great. With reticence on the one side so complete, it was inevitable that the bond between the two should have been less firm than that between children of the same family is conventionally expected to be. But still Nigel, if cool in manner and reserved of speech, had never been unkind to her, and Margaret suddenly felt that she was a traitress to have said so much as she had done to a man who, after all, whatever he might say about her father and her family and his old intimacy with them, was wholly unknown to her.

After a moment's pause, during which the two men eyed each other with steady animosity none the less real for being subdued in expression, Nigel spoke.

"Sir Robert Kerslake, I believe?"

The stranger bowed.

"And you I believe, are Mr. Nigel Blair?"

There was something in the tone in which he uttered the name which gave Margaret the first inkling of the fact that her brother was using a name not his own.

She glanced quickly at Nigel, and saw the half-guilty look on his face, and she could scarcely refrain from an exclamation, so great were the horror and dismay she felt at this wholly unexpected discovery.

For if Nigel was passing under an assumed name, surely she and her mother must be doing the same?

For one moment she told herself that she was under a misapprehension; but the longer she looked, the more she heard, the more strongly was it borne in upon her that this was indeed the case.

"Shall we go into the house?" said Nigel, speaking in a strange tone of utter despair such as Margaret had never before heard him use.

And stronger and ever stronger grew her impression that the stranger's visit was an unwelcome one, that he had come upon some errand which caused Nigel not only shame but consternation.

What had he done?

There was guilt in every line of the young man's face, in every glance of his eye. If he had been a murderer caught in a crime he could scarcely have looked in the face of the other man with a more hangdog air.

Sir Robert, on the other hand, though he was very quiet, and his manner extremely subdued, betrayed unmistakably the fact that he came as an accuser. There was a sort of subdued triumph in his eye which showed Margaret that this visit, which was so unwelcome and so distressing to her brother, was a sort of climax to a long search on the part of the visitor. Indeed he did not disguise the fact, for he said in answer to the young man's invitation:

"Yes. I have a great deal to say to you. I have had great difficulty in finding you, too, very great difficulty. You buried yourself well, Mr. Blair."

Once more he laid sufficient stress upon the name to confirm Margaret's suspicions. She stood looking from one to the other until Sir Robert caught sight of her, and turning at once, with a charming and genial smile, said:

"We are distressing this young lady, I'm afraid. Let us reassure her, Mr. Blair. Don't put on such tragic looks, as if my visit were a blow. It ought not to be anything but welcome, and it shall not be, if I can help it, I assure you."

But Nigel's face never relaxed. Margaret looked at him and then said:

"Nigel, why do you look so cross? You ought to be glad to see your father's old friend."

The question was a tentative one.

Her brother glanced quickly at the stranger.

"Is that what you told her—that you were—an old friend?"

Sir Robert looked him steadily and genially in the face.

"Yes, and it's quite true, as you know. You, Mr. Blair, will never find me anything but a friend, I hope. I should be very sorry to have to treat you otherwise."

Margaret was frightened. Under the stranger's genial manner she perceived the tone of veiled menace, and she ran forward, and said quickly:

"What is the matter? Won't you tell me what this means? What is it that you are keeping from me—both of you?"

The stranger put his hand gently upon her arm.

"Don't distress yourself, Miss Blair. There is nothing kept from you except a little family matter which it would scarcely be wise to discuss at this moment. If you would only persuade your brother not to receive me in this hostile spirit, I assure you there would be no necessity for any distress on his part, none whatever."

Margaret turned to her brother, but he refused to be conciliatory. Instead he spoke more harshly than ever, as he shook off his sister's hand, and addressing the stranger, said abruptly:

"You ought not to have spoken to her. Come with me."

Margaret fell back, trembling. But Sir Robert Kerslake, taking pity upon her distress, whispered kindly as he turned to follow Nigel:

"Don't look so unhappy, my dear young lady. There is nothing to worry yourself about, I assure you, nothing."

And Nigel turning quickly at this point, Sir Robert raised his hat to the young lady and followed her brother into the house.

Margaret waited until they had

entered the drawing-room by the open French window, which she saw Nigel shut when they were inside. Then she went into the house by another entrance, and crossing the hall slowly, wondered what was going on in the drawing-room between the two men.

She was in a state of the most acute distress, for it was impossible not to see that this visit had struck terror and despair into her brother. She began to ask herself what those long absences of Nigel's had really meant, and whether there were some explanation of them which she would not like to hear.

Lingering in the hall, uncertain whether to go upstairs to her mother or to wait for her brother and his guest to come out, she heard the voices of the two men rising high as if they had lost control of themselves. And then the door of the drawing-room was flung open suddenly, and Sir Robert, standing with the handle in his hand, said quietly but in a voice of great decision:

"In an hour then, I'll return for your answer."

Margaret fled up the stairs, in time to escape him as he came out. But he turned back again into the drawing-room and once more shut himself in with Nigel.

Margaret ran trembling upstairs, where she met her mother walking up and down the corridor.

"Mammie, who is he?" she asked breathlessly.

She was horror-struck at the expression on her mother's face. Mrs. Blair looked like a madwoman, with her wild eyes, her parted lips, and her white cheeks. She shook her head and made no answer to her daughter's question, but stood in a listening attitude, with her hands clenched and her figure drawn to its full height.

"Mammie, Mammie, answer me! Why is Nigel afraid of him? What has Nigel done?"

In a hollow voice came the answer: "Nigel is dead."

CHAPTER V

THE FADED PHOTOGRAPH

MARGARET stared at her mother in consternation. Had she gone mad?

This seemed at first sight the only possible explanation of the anguish in her face, the exaggerated emotion which distorted her features, of her wild and meaningless words.

Nigel dead! How could that be, when but a few moments before Margaret had heard his voice disputing or arguing with the visitor?

She looked steadfastly at her mother, without daring to speak. The silence seemed appalling. Not a sound came up to their ears from the drawing-room, where the two men were still shut in together. It might have been a house of the dead for any sound that reached the two ladies, as they stood fixed to face at the top of the staircase, neither speaking, neither attempting to pass the other.

At last Mrs. Blair spoke again.

"Where have you been?" she asked sharply. "Whom have you been talking with?"

"I was in the shrubbery, on the seat there, when—a gentleman came out from the house," answered Margaret, unutterably thankful to hear words a little more rational from her mother's lips.

Her mother frowned.

"And what did he say to you?"

Margaret hesitated.

"I'll tell you everything, mother," she said in a low voice, "but not here, and not now. What are you waiting for? Are you going down to the drawing-room? What are you afraid of?"

Margaret peered searchingly into her face.

Mrs. Blair, however, scarcely seemed to hear her daughter, so intent was she on listening to what was going on below.

Margaret stood back, attracted by something which caught her eye in the distant recesses of the corridor. The house was an old one, much restored, added to, altered, and full of odd nooks and corners, unexpected stairs, and oddly-shaped rooms and passages.

There were no less than three staircases in it, so that it was not easy to find any person who wished to escape pursuit; and the girl, though she made a plunge forward in the direction of a figure she dimly saw at the end of the corridor, felt sure that she would not be in time to discover the identity of the run-away.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Blair, turning sharply when she saw her daughter move.

"It's one of the servants, I think, coming from your room."

Margaret left her mother, and flitted with light feet along the corridor in the direction of the figure she had dimly seen.

There was nothing of itself suspicious in the fact of a maid-servant's being seen on her way from Mrs. Blair's room. Although her own maid was out, it was not unusual for the other servants to have access to their mistress's room on one errand or another; but the time of day had to be considered, and the fact that, between tea-time and dinner-time, there was no need for any of the maids except the lady's maid to be about in that quarter of the house.

There was, besides, something furtive about the rapid flight of the figure she had dimly seen, and Margaret was convinced that she would discover the skirt she saw to belong to the head housemaid, Maguire, who had already caused

surprise that afternoon by her behaviour in following the visitor out of the house to the seat in the shrubbery.

The flying skirt had whisked across the corridor at the dark end and had disappeared on the right-hand side.

Margaret ran in pursuit on tiptoe, wondering whether Maguire would have crept down the north staircase towards the drawing-room, to try to find out what was going on in there. But before she got to the end of the corridor she thought she caught the sound of a movement going on in her mother's boudoir, on her right hand.

She stopped and listened at the door. Yes, she heard the sound of the moving about of furniture, and the next moment she had softly turned the handle of the door, and was peeping into the room.

The boudoir was now somewhat dark, for it was on the east side of the house, and the two long windows were overshadowed by the trees which grew so near.

It was a long room, furnished with old-fashioned chairs and tables, cabinets and whatnots, all of Early Victorian design, in rosewood for the most part.

Margaret had often felt the charm of the room, which looked far behind the rest of the house in point of date, with its old chintz hangings, its pale carpet with conventional flowers and ribbons designed upon it.

The piano was old, a cottage piano with a front of fluted silk faded and worn, with yellow keys and short compass. The sofa was of the old pattern, with many curves and with the high part of the back just where it was inconvenient for it to be high, and the low part just where for comfort's sake it ought to have been high.

For all that, Margaret used to think that it was pretty; she admired the curves of the little spindle-

legged chairs, with the hard little wooden roses for ornaments; she loved the queer blue and white shiny material with which they and the sofa were covered. As for the old chintz of the curtains and the deep valance with its heavy fringe, she loved them more than the rest. It seemed to her that the subdued shabbiness of all these things was pleasanter than the brighter tints of the newer furniture in the rest of the house, that the purposeless lustres on the mantelpiece, the wax flowers, chipped and broken and less like life than ever, which reposed under a glass shade on a small round table in the corner, spoke aloud of other days, of other tastes, and that they woke suggestions and questions about that family history which was a scaled book to her.

Into this room, therefore, she never went but with a sort of heartache, so plainly did it try to speak to her, in its prim, old-fashioned fittings, of a time of which she knew nothing, but would fain have known so much.

Now, entering it with her mind full of the conversation with the stranger, whom she looked upon as the repository of all the secrets she wanted to learn, Margaret seemed to feel an oppression in the very atmosphere, and to look round her as at the relics of a time which was about to open its treasures to her view.

But the sentiment with which she peeped in was at once succeeded by something stronger than a sentiment as, opening the door gradually until it stood wide enough for her to look right in, she became aware that the noise she had heard was caused by the movements of a human being.

The head housemaid, Maguire, was, in fact, down on her knees in the corner of the room which was furthest from the door, and was busily occupied in turning over the contents of an old-fashioned box

ottoman, with a frilled chintz cover, that stood in the angle of the room by one of the windows.

It was so dark by this time that she had to bend closely over the box, as she rummaged among its contents, and only her back was visible to Margaret in the doorway.

By her side lay a pile of old books, music, prints, papers of various sorts, and as she turned over the rest of the contents of the ottoman with feverish haste, Margaret had leisure to wonder at the daring of the woman, in thus venturing to ransack her mistress's property when the mistress herself was not so many yards away.

It was, of course, possible that Maguire, coming up by the north staircase, had not been aware of the presence of Mrs. Blair at the head of the chief staircase. She might have supposed that the family were all in the drawing-room with the mysterious guest, and have taken what looked to her like a good opportunity of satisfying her curiosity upon some point which was puzzling her.

Margaret watched her with curious eyes.

That the woman was looking for something which she expected to find, and not merely examining the articles in idle curiosity, was evident. For she ferreted and turned over the papers and books, the prints and the old photographs, with quick fingers, not looking at anything, but searching, searching always, clearly on the look-out for some particular thing which she expected to find there.

Consumed by curiosity and something more grave, Margaret did not attempt to make her own presence known to the housemaid, but stood watching by the door for some seconds, at the end of which time she began to make her way, step by step, slowly and cautiously, across the floor, in the direction of the kneeling, rummaging figure.

The room was a long one, and the boards of the flooring were old, so that each step made Margaret quake with fear lest the creak of the old wood would betray her.

At last, however, she got near enough to be able to look over into the box, by craning her neck, and to distinguish the various things Maguire turned over in her hurried search.

At last the housemaid uttered a sigh of satisfaction, and sitting back on her heels with a fresh pile of pictures and papers in her hands, began to look at them more carefully, one by one, until she came to a small cardboard portfolio which she opened quickly, and out of which she took a collection of loose photographs, all old and some very much faded and inspected them one by one.

Margaret came softly nearer, and looked over the woman's shoulder.

Rapidly the housemaid turned over one photograph after another, until a little heap lay on the floor beside her. Then an exclamation of satisfaction escaped her lips, as she pored over one little faded portrait, holding it in both hands, and contemplating it with the deepest interest.

When she had hung over it for some moments, she held it away from her with her right hand, so as to let the light from the window fall full upon it.

At that moment Margaret, seizing her opportunity, snatched the picture from her hand.

Maguire scrambled to her feet with a cry of dismay, and turned to face the young lady, who had retreated some steps, and was holding the photograph tightly in her hand, which she placed behind her.

"What were you doing?" asked Margaret.

For a moment Maguire looked as if she meant to make an impertinent answer. The next, she recovered herself, bit her lip in confusion,

looked down, and then, without a word, began to pick up the prints, photographs, and papers which her sudden movement had scattered all over the floor.

"I—I was doing no harm, miss," she said presently, when she had gathered up all the scattered treasures, and put the photographs back into the portfolio.

Margaret, still clinging tightly to the photograph, at which she had not yet been able to look, remained standing at some distance from the housemaid, watching her while she replaced in the ottoman all the things which had been in her lap. Margaret said not a word while this went on.

When the housemaid had finished her work, even to making the inside of the ottoman neat as well as the outside, when she had shut down the lid and carefully pulled the frill on the cover into place, she approached the young lady, and, with a flush in her cheeks and something like a tremor in her voice, said:

"I hope you won't say nothing about my having been in here to Mrs. Blair, miss. I was doing no harm, only getting a look at a photograph I knew was there. You will see yourself, miss, if you look at it, why I wanted so bad to see it again. I'm not a Paul Pry, but I wanted—there, miss, you look at it and you'll see what I wanted for to see."

Maguire gave her an earnest look, and nodded slowly. Margaret, eager and curious, tried hard not to look interested, as she said:

"I must tell her if she asks, you know. But I won't if I can help it."

There was less of humility, and something more of cool impudence in the housemaid's tone as she replied:

"Thank you, miss."

The young lady remained in the room when Maguire went out, and going quickly to the window,

examined the treasure which she had snatched from the woman's hand.

It was a small, old-fashioned photograph, yellow with age, and with no date upon it. It represented the head of a young man; and was easily recognizable, with all changes wrought by time taken into account, as the man she had seen that afternoon, the mysterious visitor whose arrival had caused so much distress to her mother and to Nigel, and who had aroused so much curiosity in Maguire, the head housemaid.

Margaret's heart beat fast as she looked. Yes, there could be very little doubt that she held in her hand the portrait of the very man with whom she had been speaking that afternoon. This circumstance, by itself, would have been of no particular importance. The fact which filled the portrait with the same mystery and interest as the original had done was that, on the back of it, in her mother's handwriting, were written these words:

"From my dear Randolph."

Randolph! And the name given by the stranger was Sir Robert Kerslake! This seemed an odd circumstance. But strange as it was, there was one other point which was much stranger still. The inscription on the back of the photograph was an affectionate one. Evidently at the time of writing it her mother had been fond of the original of the picture.

Who was he? In what relation had he stood to her? Was the evidently unwelcome guest of the afternoon really the same man as the original of the picture? And if so, what had happened to change her feeling towards him so completely that she spoke as if his coming meant ruin or death to her son Nigel?

These questions crowded into Margaret's brain as she stood looking at the little portrait in her hand, wondering if she might dare to show

it to her mother, and challenge her to say whether "Dear Randolph" and "Sir Robert Kerslake" were one and the same person.

But she decided that she did not dare. What would she learn, if she were to hear the truth? Something which would sadden, or shock her, undoubtedly. Margaret felt that she had not hardness of heart enough to put the matter so crudely and so plainly before her mother.

No. She must try in some other way to get at the heart of the mystery, and in the meantime she would use different means, less violent, less bold, to induce her mother to let her into the secret which, after all, had evidently been freely told to her brother.

And she remembered what the stranger had told her that afternoon, that Nigel had, even in his boyhood, taken the part of his mother against his father.

What could have happened to make such a terrible step necessary to the child? She did not wish to think about the explanation offered by Sir Robert, that her father had been jealous of her mother. True as it was that Mrs. Blair's extreme reticence towards her daughter had made some sort of gulf between the two, that they were not greatly in sympathy with each other, the girl did not want to think that her mother could have been deeply to blame. And she reproached herself for having so much as listened to such an implied reflection on the part of the visitor.

Margaret, as she looked again at the photograph in her hand, was conscious once more that it was sympathetic to her, in the same way as the man whom she believed to have been the original had been. There was a humour and yet a refinement in the eyes, a charm in the whole expression, which she noted again, and which made her resent the idea that the mystery about

him would prove to be repellent.

She would fain have believed that he was really the tender, sympathetic old friend he professed to be, and that Nigel was to blame for receiving him with antagonism, rather than the visitor for seeking her out and for confiding to her part at least of the story of her father's and her mother's life in the old days.

However this might be, one thing was certain. Even at the risk of wounding her mother again, Margaret felt that she must speak to her frankly, must make her speak out in return, and end once for all the ridiculous position she was in, of growing up in ignorance of her own family and position in the world.

Whether this was the most appropriate time for interrogating her mother she herself doubted. But she felt reckless and uneasy, too much stirred out of her usual course of life to be prudent. And hiding the photograph in the front of her dress to be examined again later, and perhaps to be even shown to Sir Robert, Margaret went out of the room and was about to seek her mother downstairs, believing that she would have gone to speak to Nigel after the departure of the visitor, when she heard a sob from Mrs. Blair's bedroom, as she passed the door on her way to the staircase.

She knocked, and called: "Mammie, may I come in?"

There was a pause, and then, in a cold voice, Mrs. Blair gave her permission to enter. The girl saw at once that her mother had been crying, for she was red-eyed and was turning away her face so that it might not be fully seen as she sat in a high chair by one of the windows.

Meg stood irresolute in the middle of the floor, wishing she could break down the barrier between them, yet afraid to frame her questions, for Mrs. Blair was looking hard and forbidding, while the persistent way

in which she averted her face, and the reserved tones of her voice, offered no inducement to confidence.

Mrs. Blair did not even ask her why she had run away in such a hurry, nor what she had been doing. Meg was glad of this, as she did not want to tell the story of the photograph—yet at any rate.

"What do you want?"

The words were uttered almost peevishly, as if Mrs. Blair were only anxious to get rid of her. Meg, however, stood her ground.

"Mammie," she said, "what did you mean by saying that Nigel was dead? He was talking in the drawing-room only a little while ago."

"Oh, I—I spoke hastily, of course, and didn't exactly mean that. What I wished you to understand was that we are both much annoyed at the way in which you have received this—this Sir Robert Kerslake, and talked to him as if he were an old friend before you knew anything about him."

Meg was glad of this opportunity to be frank.

"Well, Mammie, what could I do? I had heard nothing from you about him; indeed I've heard nothing from you or Nigel about anybody. So when this nice old gentleman spoke to me about you and said he was an old friend of yours and of my father's, and a relation, naturally I was only too glad to be able to speak to him about my people."

"And what did he tell you?"

Mrs. Blair moved suddenly so as to face her daughter, who was standing with the full light from the west upon her beautiful young face.

"He said that he had known you both, and that he had been particularly a friend of my father's. Isn't that true?"

"Ye—es," admitted Mrs. Blair as if with reluctance.

"And is it true that he is related to you?"

There was a pause. Then Mrs. Blair snapped out her answer quickly:

"Oh, yes! That's true—unfortunately."

"Why? What has he done? Who is he?"

But her mother would not satisfy her curiosity. She rose slowly to her feet, and asked:

"Has this man gone yet?"

"I don't know. I haven't been downstairs. What has he come for? Mammie, you ought to tell me something. It's cruel to treat me like this, and unfair to be angry because I'm glad to speak to some one who isn't quite so reserved as you and Nigel. Why am I always left in the dark about everything, as if I were still a child? Even if there's something dreadful to be learnt, it's better that I should know it, than that I should be always wondering what the secret is which seems to shut us up from other people."

Mrs. Blair was half way to the door.

"You will know everything soon enough now," she said in a tone of great bitterness.

"Yes, but I should like to know it all from you. Would you really prefer that I heard it from some one outside?" asked Meg passionately, as she followed her mother to the door and prevented her going out.

Mrs. Blair seemed for a moment somewhat disconcerted by the question. Then she shrugged her shoulders with a slight touch of feminine impatience.

"Oh, it really doesn't matter! You seem to have taken a fancy to this stranger already, and probably his story would be different from mine, and you would be more ready to believe him than me."

A sense of uneasiness seized poor Margaret, who perceived at once in these words the confirmation of part of the stranger's story. Sir Robert had said that there were

dissensions between Mrs. Blair and her husband, or at least differences, and had intimated that he took the husband's part. And now Mrs. Blair seemed to hint at this very difference.

"Mammie," said the girl desperately, "how can you tell what I should or should not believe until you have tried me? Why won't you see that the way you are treating me is not only unfair but dangerous?"

"Dangerous?"

Mrs. Blair turned quickly at the word.

But Margaret repeated it boldly. "Yes, dangerous. Family quarrels and disagreements must be dangerous, mustn't they? Why don't you trust to my affection for you and Nigel, and tell me all the truth?"

But Mrs. Blair had been too long shut up in herself and her own troubles to be able to expand at a touch, no matter how sympathetic that touch might be. She shook her head mournfully.

"Child," she said, "believe me, you wouldn't be the happier for knowing. Can't you trust your own mother to know what is best?"

"Well, why do you resent going being glad to speak to some one who knew my father as well as you? And why, if you are afraid of hearing his version of the story, don't you arm me against it by telling me yours?"

It was sensibly argued, and Mrs. Blair listened, though she was not convinced.

"Let me go downstairs," she said hurriedly, "and see what this man has gone. I'll argue the matter out with you presently."

Margaret saw that her cause was hopeless, and gave way. Mrs. Blair went quickly out of the room and down the staircase, followed by her daughter.

In the hall Mrs. Blair met Margaret, and Margaret guessed that

the woman had been waiting about in the hope of seeing Sir Robert Kerslake again as he went out, and of comparing him with the photograph.

"Where is Mr. Nigel?" asked Mrs. Blair.

"He's gone into the library, ma'am, and gave orders that he was not to be disturbed."

"Is he alone?"

"Yes, ma'am. The gentleman that was with him has just gone."

Margaret heard this, and at once ran out of the house noiselessly by the garden door, and went round the house towards the avenue, hoping that she would be able to see the stranger again before he left the grounds. She could not prevent a feeling of instinctive sympathy and liking for the silver-haired, courteous old man who had locked up in his breast some of those secrets of her family which the girl was dying to know.

At the same time, her mother's reserve could not fail to affect adversely the young creature whose desire to know her own family history was only natural and right.

Although, therefore, Margaret felt something like a traitor in thus desiring another interview with the man whose visit filled her mother with distress and anxiety, she knew at the same time that she was justified in trying to find out what ought to have been confided to her without any further effort on her own part.

If she felt some fear, some sense of awe and mystery at the idea of learning something which might cause her distress, she had by this time become so used to the idea that there was a secret in the family, that these feelings no longer had the same weight that they had had some years ago, when the knowledge of the singularity of the family position first made itself known to her.

She had found her way by a wind-

ing path between tall hedges from the west to the east side of the house when she became aware that Sir Robert Kerslake had not yet left the grounds, and, moreover, that he had found a fresh companion.

Margaret stopped short, with the blood rushing into her cheeks, when she caught the sound of two voices, and heard the measured accents of Sir Robert and the merry, deep voice, full of the joyousness of youth and life, of Auckland St. Gowan.

They were walking in the avenue which lay to the north-east of the house, behind the hedge on her left hand.

Auckland, disappointed to have failed in his attempt to get a *tête-à-tête* with Margaret on his visit to Rock Hall that afternoon, had come back with the excuse of a book which he had borrowed and forgotten to return, hoping to find an opportunity of a talk with the girl who formed so potent an attraction to him and who had caused him to become so much more home-loving than he had been in his boyhood.

In the avenue he had met Sir Robert Kerslake, and the surprise of finding a stranger there had led to an interchange of remarks, which had presently led to further conversation between the old man and the young one.

Sir Robert had divined and drily suggested that the attraction for the young visitor was Margaret. Auckland, astonished and not ill pleased, had admitted the fact.

"Do you know the Blairs well?" he then asked. "You must excuse my asking such an odd question, but the fact is they have lived here for a good many years, and during all that time, though we are fairly intimate with them, I've never before met here any visitor whom I did not know."

"I used to know them very well indeed," said the stranger with a

smile. "As you may guess when I tell you that I'm a near relation of theirs."

Auckland looked deeply interested.

"Are you?" said he. "Well, I'm delighted to hear it, sir, for I can tell you what I've been for a long time wishing to tell somebody connected with them. If you know them well, you know how very reserved Mrs. Blair is, and you won't be surprised to hear that she scarcely invites confidence."

Sir Robert Kerslake laughed sympathetically.

"I can understand that," said he. "There are some ladies, and Mrs. Blair is one of them, who repel confidence rather than attract it. Well, you can speak out to me."

"May I know what the nature of your relationship is, sir?" asked the young man.

"Well, yes, I suppose there is no harm in that, though I feel rather guilty in betraying even so much, now that I learn, to my surprise, that she is living here in stately seclusion, weaving a web of mystery round herself and her children which is not only unnecessary but unwholesome."

A look of intense relief came over the young man's face.

"That's just what all her friends down here feel," he said, "but we none of us like to speak about it to her, because of that proud manner of hers. You can imagine how it has prejudiced people against the family to be held off in that way, and practically told not to ask questions in order that they may be told no lies. They've lived down the prejudice, chiefly owing to the beauty and charm of the daughter, but it has not been fair to her, as you can see. Why has it been done?"

Sir Robert shook his head.

"How can one account for the caprices of a woman, and a beautiful woman?" he asked blandly.

"All I can tell you is that there was never any need for such reticence. It is true, I can tell you, that the lady and her husband did not get on very well. Faults on both sides, as usual. But he's dead, and she ought to have got over by this time whatever troubles she may have had, especially as they were almost all of her own making."

"And may I ask, sir, if you are a near relation of theirs?" enquired Auckland diffidently for the second time.

Sir Robert Kerslake, who had turned back to walk up the avenue with the younger visitor, stopped short and faced him.

"Oh, yes!" he said. "I am the lady's brother."

Auckland uttered a cry of surprise.

"By Love!" said he. "Mrs. Blair's brother! Then you're Meg's uncle—and Nigel's," he added as an afterthought.

"Yes," said Sir Robert smiling. "And I suppose I shouldn't be far wrong in supposing that your interest in Meg's uncle is stronger than your interest in Nigel's?"

Auckland laughed.

"I admit the soft impeachment," said he. "In fact, there's nothing in the world I could hear would please me so well as this, that there is at least a man of the family to whom I can speak about this. I'm simply awfully fond of Meg, and we are all: and my sister is just as fond of Nigel. But while Mrs. Blair maintains that strange reticence which first made the court talk when she came here even so many years ago, our people feel a little diffidence—don't you see—in letting us have our way."

"I quite understand. And I may tell you that, while I know Mrs. Blair, who is a very obstinate and strong-minded woman, never chose to be reticent about her family, there is really no reason why she should keep up the same

silence now. My sister and I are of decent family——"

"Of course, of course!"

"And while I sympathize with certain matrimonial troubles of hers which have made her unduly sensitive, I cannot but deplore the result of her behaviour in not boldly taking the bull by the horns, and using her own name instead of a fictitious one."

"I knew it! I was sure of it! I was quite certain they were people of better family than they pretended, and I only hope you will insist upon her breaking through her foolish rule of reticence, and that, if she won't, you will for her."

Sir Robert stood still again, and frowned.

"I don't see how I can until she gives me leave," said he. "Although I am her brother, I shall stay here—if I do stay here (and she is not at all anxious for that)—as her guest. In that case, I could scarcely fly in the face of her wishes by telling you what she herself wished to conceal, could I?"

"You might persuade her?" suggested Auckland.

"I'll do my best. But I'm not sanguine. She is not at all pleased at my having found her out, I may tell you. Neither is Nigel."

"And Meg?"

"Bless her little heart! she took to me, I think I may say, without knowing how close our relationship is to each other, just as I took to her."

Auckland looked delighted.

"Perhaps," suggested he, "she may prove the means of making it up with Mrs. Blair and getting her consent to end this farce, which is putting us all to inconvenience. My people are as fond of Meg and Nigel as we younger ones are ourselves. But it's impossible to pretend they like the thought of the intimacy increasing in the present conditions."

"Of course not."

"I wish you'd come and see my father and mother, Mr.——"

The stranger eyed him shrewdly.

"Not Mr.," said he quietly.

"Call me Sir Robert. I wish I could come and see your people, and end this preposterous state of affairs. But I daren't until my sister—I mean Mrs. Blair, and for goodness' sake don't let her know I told you the truth about my relationship to her!—until she lets me speak out. I'm awfully sorry for you, my dear boy, for I may tell you I know all about your people, and that I knew your father well many years ago——"

"You did! Oh, confound Mrs. Blair and her whims! Surely you don't mean to say you'll respect them after what I've told you?"

"I don't see how I can help myself."

The two men had drawn near the house, and Sir Robert now caught sight of Margaret, who was just emerging from the walk beside the orchard. He turned to her with a smile of pleasure.

"Ah! Miss Margaret!" said he, "I am glad to see you again."

The girl was confused at the meeting with the two, for she at once perceived that something of unusual interest had passed between them.

"You are coming back to the house again?" she said.

"Yes; I have a few more words to say to your brother, and in the meantime I have filled up my time very pleasantly by making a new acquaintance."

And he turned, smiling, to Auckland, who, confused and excited at the vista opened up by the meeting with this unexpected ally, was standing a little apart with the book he had brought in his hand, not quite knowing what to say. Sir Robert, however, smoothed things over, made him give up the

book to Meg, and dismissed him with a promise to see him again. Then after a few more words to Meg, in which shrewd kindly sympathy for her and Auckland showed itself at once, he once more rang the bell and asked for Nigel.

Rudge, the manservant who opened the door, showed the visitor into the drawing-room, with the information that his master was in the library, and had given word that he was not to be disturbed for an hour. And then the servant told Margaret that Mrs. Blair wished to speak to her.

Meg, therefore, bade Sir Robert good-bye rather more stiffly for the presence of the servant, who was, she felt sure, acting as spy for her mother. Instead of going upstairs she flew across the hall and tried the door of the library, and finding it locked called to her brother to open it.

There was no answer, and feeling suspicious after her mother's strange words about her brother, she ran out of the house and tried the windows. One of them was unfastened, and she sprang upon the sill and got inside.

The lamp was burning on the table behind the screen, as usual when her brother was reading or studying in the evening. She called him gently by name, but got no answer. Creeping fearfully to the screen, therefore, she looked round it. The table was there, the lighted lamp, the open book, the chair drawn up, as usual.

But the chair was empty!

stand the meaning of his disappearance.

This fascinating stranger, this well-bred man of the world with his gentle voice and kind manner, whom Mrs. Blair had received with so much repugnance, and whose coming had distressed her so greatly, could not be a friend at all. He must be a person acquainted with some ugly secret which affected chiefly Nigel, and he must have come with the expressed intention of exacting bribes from the family for keeping silence about it.

So, crudely, thought poor Margaret as she reviewed quickly the circumstances of the stranger's arrival, of his interview with her, of the housemaid's pursuit of him, of his pursuit of the housemaid, of the words she had heard him utter to Nigel.

These words seemed to her to be the most conclusive part of the evidence against Sir Robert Kerslake. He had threatened to come back in an hour to receive her brother's answer, and in the meantime Mrs. Blair had expressed a hasty opinion that her son was already dead, implying that the arrival of the stranger had been a death-blow to him.

It was true that Meg had been so much repelled by her mother's cold reserve and attracted by Sir Robert's kindness of manner and sympathetic treatment of herself and Auckland, that she had for the time been ready to take the stranger's part against her own family. It was true, too, that Mrs. Blair had acknowledged her relationship to the new-comer, and that that relationship had been apparently confirmed by the sight of the photograph with the inscription.

But even if this relationship existed, it now seemed plain to the girl that it was not as a relation and friend that Sir Robert had come, but as an enemy and disturber of the domestic peace.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER FALSE COLOURS

A GREAT fear took possession of Margaret as she gazed at her brother's chair, and began dimly to under-

Nigel had done something wrong, and this gentle-mannered visitor had come to upbraid him with it. And Nigel, afraid of meeting his accuser again, had disappeared.

So argued Nigel's sister as, with straining eyes and a fast-beating heart, she stared round the room, peered into the dark corners, and looked fearfully into the shadows outside the circle of soft light from the lamp.

Nigel was gone.

She did not for a moment entertain the thought that he might be still in the house, that he might have taken a walk in the garden, or passed through it and returned to the mansion by another entrance.

The discovery that the door was locked while the window was open seemed to her to make such a suggestion worthless. It seemed clear to her that he had given out his intention of spending the evening in the library, with the express purpose of putting off as long as possible the discovery that he had himself escaped by the window.

She stood stupefied, looking at the chair, the lamp, the open book, and noticed that the work in question was a volume of old sermons, one of those rows of dull-looking books which encumber all country libraries but which nobody ever reads.

No, Nigel had not been reading, but he had seized a book at random, opened it, laid it upon the table, and then gone out with the fixed intention of not returning.

Margaret felt as sure of all these things as if her brother had taken her into his confidence about them.

What had he done?

Had he done anything seriously wrong? or was he alarming himself without due reason?

Puzzled, perplexed, sick with anxiety and vague horror of these wholly unexpected mysteries, which now seemed to be growing more impenetrable than before, Mar-

garet walked slowly to the door, turned the key in the lock, and then heard something outside which told her some one was waiting there.

Instead of turning the handle she drew back a step, and the next moment the door was opened softly and her mother came in.

Margaret was behind the door as it opened, and Mrs. Blair, without seeing her, looked towards the screen.

"Nigel!" she called softly.

There was, of course, no answer, and the next moment Mrs. Blair had discovered her daughter. The sight of the girl filled her with anger, and she drew herself up at once, her whole manner changing, her voice becoming hard and imperious.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"I wanted to speak to Nigel, but I find he has gone away," said the girl, not with any apparent curiosity but in a tone of dull despair, which seemed to show that she had now given up all hope of being enlightened by her mother as to the nature of the difficulties in which the family was placed.

Mrs. Blair looked disturbed, not by her son's disappearance, but by her daughter's entrance.

"What made you come in?" asked she; "and how did you get in?"

"I got in by the window. I had to; the door was locked. I suppose," she went on recklessly, "he pretended to be locked in here in order to give himself time to get away."

Mrs. Blair looked shocked at her daughter's perspicacity.

"What put such an idea into your head?" she asked quickly.

"What other idea could I have after what has happened? I see that Nigel has done something wrong or wicked, that this Sir Robert has found it out, and that you and Nigel are afraid of the consequences. What else could I

think? If I am wrong, I know you won't put me right. I know."

The girl shrugged her shoulders and walked towards the door. Mrs. Blair turned to watch her.

"Where are you going now?" she asked.

"To the drawing-room," answered Margaret, boldly.

Mrs. Blair went after her at a pace which was rapid compared to her usual gait.

"And what are you going to do there?" she asked almost threateningly.

"I'm going to tell Sir Robert Kerslake that it is of no use to wait in the hope of seeing Nigel, because Nigel has gone away."

Margaret had expected an explosion of anger as the result of this reckless and daring speech, but her mother only tightened her grasp of her arm, and said—

"Don't do that—yet. It is of no use to ask you to go quietly upstairs and not to interfere, of course, because you have so evidently made up your mind to take sides with this stranger against us. But if I warn you that it will be best for you and me, as well as for him and everybody, that Nigel should get away before this Sir Robert has a hint of his having gone, perhaps you will allow yourself to be persuaded."

"Has he only gone away, mother? Or has he?"—she dropped her voice—"killed himself?"

Her mother looked startled, but recovered herself.

"I don't know," she said; "I really don't know myself. And he has done nothing wrong, nothing whatever."

"Then what has Sir Robert done? And why has he come here?"

There was a pause, and then, before Mrs. Blair could answer, the two ladies heard a man's step in the hall, and the door opened and Sir Robert Kerslake came in.

"I must apologize for this intru-

sion," he said courteously, in the same bland, gentle voice that he had used all the time, as he stood within the room, his hand still on the closed door, "though it seems strange that I should have to apologize here, Letitia, for such a small thing as entering one of the rooms unannounced."

Both the ladies showed the most intense interest in this speech, which betrayed at once to Margaret that he had some hold upon her mother stronger than he had allowed her to suppose. Mrs. Blair looked desperately alarmed.

It was the first time that Sir Robert had met both the ladies together, and he stood still when he had finished his speech, looking from the one to the other, apparently comparing the two.

"What is it you want?" asked Mrs. Blair.

And her tone seemed to reveal a whole world of anguish and despair to her daughter, who glanced quickly at her mother and then again at the visitor without saying a word, but with the keenest interest in the proceedings.

Sir Robert was as gentle and courteous as ever as he answered, and his humility and deference to the woman who was treating him in such a haughty and unresponsive manner struck Margaret with a sense of discomfort and even pain. In spite of herself, in spite of her natural feeling for her mother and brother, she felt that she was really doing what her mother had accused her of—taking sides with the stranger against her own people. They seemed so determined to ride rough-shod over him, and he on his side took their rebuffs so meekly.

"I only want," he said quietly, but with some gentle dignity, "to have that short interview with Nigel which he promised to give me. We had had a discussion, a long discussion, about the family

affairs, and he asked for a little time to consider a proposition I laid before him. I have come back for his answer, as he wished."

As he spoke these words he glanced towards the screen, as if supposing that the person about whom he was speaking was within hearing. There was a pause: then Sir Robert appeared to become suddenly suspicious, and made a movement as if to go behind the screen. Mrs. Blair stood in the way.

"You shall have it," she said in the same cold voice as before. "But as the matter is one which needs consideration, you will not, I think, press my son too much for a hasty answer. Margaret"—she turned to her daughter—"take Sir Robert back to the drawing-room, and play to him or talk to him while I settle this with your brother."

But Margaret had not time to move before Sir Robert, increasingly suspicious, suddenly stepped back, and approaching the screen at a rapid pace from the other side looked round it and discovered the fraud which had been practised upon him.

Margaret was startled by the change which instantly took place in the little quiet man. He became transformed into a raging fire of indignation and resentment as he flung down the screen and confronted Mrs. Blair with his eyes alight with passion.

"You have done this!" he exclaimed. "You have sent him away! Why? What is the meaning of it?"

Mrs. Blair cowered visibly and sank into a chair.

Sir Robert stood over her threateningly, his voice hoarse with anger.

"Why have you done this? Answer me!"

Mrs. Blair glanced towards her daughter, as if begging him to remember the girl's presence. He

wheeled round towards her, and in an instant his manner changed and became gentle.

"You are frightening her, frightening my daughter!" whispered Mrs. Blair.

"I think not," said Sir Robert quite gently. "I think she can see that I have been tricked and that I am annoyed, justly annoyed."

Margaret was standing at some distance from the other two, wondering whether she were about to discover the key to the mystery which bound them all together in some tangle of doubt and misery and despair.

"I am not frightened," said the girl. "But I should be very grateful if you would tell me what it all means; why Nigel has gone away, and what relation you are to us."

Sir Robert smiled faintly, as if his passion were already melting into a more subdued form of resentment.

"Well," he said, "it is right that you should know the truth." Mrs. Blair uttered a cry of horror, and muttered some indistinguishable words, whether of entreaty or despair Margaret could not make out. But he went on, "I am a relation of yours, as I told you, and it is as a relation that I have come here to-day, asking nothing but my rights. In the first place I asked to be acknowledged as a relation and accepted as one. In the next place I intend now to ask something more."

"What?" gasped Mrs. Blair.

Her tone made him smile.

"I ask to be allowed to remain here with you now that your son has left you by yourselves. I ask, as your brother, Letitia, and as the uncle of your daughter, that I may stay here and protect you, take care of you, save you from the consequences of your own indiscretion in trying to bury yourself here away from all your friends and acquaintances. I ask that

you should receive me here as your brother, and in return I promise to respect your incognito, however much I may deplore the caprice which made you use it. I promise to pass myself off as Sir Robert Kerslake, Mrs. Blair, and to keep my real name a secret as well as yours."

Mrs. Blair had listened to this harangue in dead silence, and without a movement. At the last words, however, she looked up.

"Why can't you leave us alone?" she said hoarsely.

"I would have done so," answered he, dropping into his usual genial tones, "if you had let me. I came prepared only to ask what I know you will admit I had a right to ask—my share of the property which you are enjoying. You admit that, don't you?"

"Must we discuss this before my daughter?"

"There's nothing to discuss. I want you to admit, in her presence, that I only claimed my rights. Do you admit that?"

She made a movement of impatience, but the next moment she said reluctantly—

"Ye—es; I suppose I must admit that."

Sir Robert turned to the girl with a smile of quiet triumph.

"That," he said, "is what I wanted you to hear and to understand: that I came here with no object but to claim a part of what is mine."

Margaret bowed her head in assent. She was getting more puzzled every moment as to the nature of the secret which was being hidden from her, and of which she got such tantalizing little peeps, only for the veil to be drawn down again over the more material parts of the story.

"Why don't you tell me everything both of you," she said boldly, "instead of giving me only enough to puzzle me the more?"

"What is it you want to know

now?" asked Sir Robert indulgently.

"Everything. Mother, is Sir Robert really your brother and my uncle?"

Mrs. Blair, instead of replying at once, looked across at the visitor, and Margaret had a notion that her answer, when it was given, was prompted as much by fear as by a desire to speak the exact truth.

"Yes," she said faintly, at last.

"Then now tell me another thing. Why is it necessary for you both to wear names that are not yours?"

"That," said Sir Robert promptly, "is your mother's doing, not mine. I am ready to resume my own name the moment she gives the word. But, coming here as her guest, I have no choice but to respect her wishes; so that as long as she wishes to conceal her identity I am forced, as her brother, to conceal mine."

"Mother, why do you do it? And why has Nigel gone away?"

"I think," said Sir Robert, when there was a pause, "that I can answer at least the latter question. My nephew has gone away because he has been so long accustomed to rule here, to have all his own way in defiance of common sense and custom, that he resents the coming of a relation with rights which he intends to use."

Under all the suavity of his manner there peeped out once more the suggestion of a latent passion and power which his usual gentleness only concealed.

Mrs. Blair drew herself up as Sir Robert said this; but although she looked resentful, she did not dare to contradict him. He turned to her.

"You know how bad for your children's prospects your manner of life here has been. You know that the neighbours have wondered and gossiped, and put their heads together over it, and that the fact

has militated against your children's happiness."

"What do you mean?" gasped she.

"Simply this, that I've had an interview with a neighbour of yours, Lord St. Gowan's son"—Mrs. Blair uttered a low cry of consternation—"and that I've learnt something about the way in which you have conducted your affairs here. I beg you, for your children's sake—and particularly your daughter's, if not for your own—to be more discreet for the future. I beg you to allow me to regulate the affairs of your household more wisely, in order that the girl may take her proper place in society as the daughter of a gentleman who, if he had been still alive, would have been grieved to the heart to see his beautiful daughter's prospects spoiled by her mother's mad caprice. I beg you, *Letitia*, I beg you earnestly, as you brother and the uncle of this lovely girl, to receive me, to treat me fairly, and in so doing to help forward your own daughter's happiness."

Mrs. Blair made no answer to this speech for quite a long time. She seemed, in fact, to be completely overwhelmed by it, and crouched in her chair with such a wild expression of dismay and horror in her eyes that Margaret, as she watched her, wondered whether her mother were not really going out of her mind.

But at last Mrs. Blair raised her head and said, without looking at Sir Robert, who maintained the same easy air and confidence with which he had spoken, and seemed almost unconcerned with the lady's anguish—

"And what is it you want me to do?"

"To give up this place, to sell, let it, whichever you please." Not only Mrs. Blair, but Margaret, turned to him with indignation when he made this proposal. But he did

not seem to notice their change of attitude, and he went on: "You have made yourself talked about here. So much I have learnt already. I am surprised that a woman of your intelligence, *Letitia*, should have made such a mistake as to suppose it could be otherwise when you deliberately tried to bury your past without taking pains to provide a fresh one."

"You say this to me—you, who know!"

He turned towards her quite easily.

"I don't wish to be hard upon you. You have had your trials, and if you have done rash things you have suffered for them. But I put it to you, was it not inevitable, when you refused to give any account of yourself and your family, that people should think there was something worse to hide than was actually the case?"

Mrs. Blair stared at him in amazement.

"Worse!" echoed she. "How could it be worse?"

But Sir Robert was unmoved by her melodramatic tone. He turned to her again.

"Now then," he said, with a pleasant suggestion of indulgence towards a froward child, which Margaret thought rather touching, "can't you see that these people, the St. Gowan's, must have come to a painful conclusion about you and your children, a conclusion which is far from the truth, and which must be unfairly prejudicial to the young people?"

"Yes, I suppose I see what you mean. But how was I to help what they thought? You know I could not have told them the truth."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps that would scarcely have been advisable. Still, something better might have been made of the business than you have made. If you preferred to bury your own

family, couldn't you have invented one?"

She moved impatiently.

"Even if I had been the sort of woman to care to tell falsehoods about myself," she answered impatiently, "how could I have invented any sort of story about a family to deceive these people who make the subject of families their principal study? I thought, by passing ourselves off as people of no family at all, to disarm suspicion. It is not my fault if they were astute enough to see that this could not be the case."

The visitor smiled with evident pleasure.

"Blood tells, of course," said he. "Well then, since that was bound to be the case, since you could not invent a family and could not tell the whole truth about your own, why couldn't you leave England and establish yourself somewhere abroad, where your own beauty and your daughter's would have given you sufficient introduction to society as good as any you find here?"

Mrs. Blair looked interested, but surprised.

"There would have been the same difficulty," she said, "about family."

"Oh no, there would not. You could have used your own name and title, and even if the truth had been found out it could scarcely have affected you out of England."

Margaret was by this time listening with bated breath, hoping that the two speakers had forgotten her presence, and that within the next few minutes the whole of the secret so tantalizingly withheld would come out.

Mrs. Blair was breathing quickly, and holding her hand pressed against her breast, as if trying to restrain the wild beating of her heart.

"There were difficulties," she fal-

tered. "There was Nigel's future to be considered."

The visitor shrugged his shoulders and a shadow crossed his face, as it so often did at the mention of the young man's name.

"Yes, of course, that was the difficulty, as it must always be," he said in a peculiar tone which Margaret could not understand. "But now that he has decided for himself what course he intends to take, there is no need to consider him any longer, is there? You can give your whole attention to your daughter and to her interests."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing but what I have already advised. Give up this place and go abroad. I myself am cosmopolitan, and I can introduce my sister and my niece into society as good as any in England."

"Oh, I couldn't think of it!"

Sir Robert turned to Margaret.

"And you, Margaret," said he. "Wouldn't you like to get away from this place, where your young life is shadowed by a secret which seems to cast a slur upon you? Wouldn't you like to go to some place where you could bear your own name once more, and take your proper place as the daughter of a——"

Mrs. Blair, however, had risen from her chair, and now interposed between her daughter and the visitor.

"No, no, no!" she said. "Don't ask her. How can she answer, knowing nothing?"

"She knows enough. And if she were to go away she should know all."

"Then she shall not go," said Mrs. Blair almost fiercely. "Leave us alone. You shall have whatever you want, only leave us alone. We are used to our way of life here; we don't want to change it. Whether the young ones have a future or not, they are happy in the present."

The visitor laughed with gentle mockery.

"Nigel! Is he happy, do you think? Would he have taken flight if the prospect had been as rosy as you say? Come, Margaret, persuade your mother. Tell her she is bound to give you the advantages which belong to you by birth, and to take you where you can bear your own name without reproach."

But Margaret took a different view of the matter.

"I don't want to go away," she said steadily. "But I ask you to persuade my mother to let our real name be known to our friends. It's quite true that we rest under a disadvantage through the mystery about us. If there is nothing for us to be ashamed of in the story, why shouldn't we let it be known."

But her simple words caused evident embarrassment to both her hearers. It was Mrs. Blair who spoke first. Turning to her daughter she said—

"It rests with—your uncle to make it known or not as he pleases."

Margaret turned to him in surprise.

"Is this true?" she asked quickly.

But she saw at once, by the embarrassment which appeared on his face, that it was. More puzzled than ever, the girl looked from the one to the other, until her mother said—

"In any case let her choose whether she will go away or stay here."

"I should choose to stay, mother, as you know," said Margaret in a low voice.

Sir Robert shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "if you have made up your mind, I can't say anything more. But we must have a new *régime* here. I shall invite a few lively friends from town and try to stir up the life here. I should

go mad with melancholy if I were to live shut up as you do."

Mrs. Blair looked very much distressed and disturbed.

"Why not live in town?" she asked quickly. "Surely you would not find this place very congenial even if you were to bring your friends?"

Sir Robert smiled maliciously, Margaret thought.

"That is what I myself proposed in the first instance," said he. "You seem to forget that your son objected to my plan, and said it would not do."

Mrs. Blair made an impatient movement, and Margaret, more bewildered by each fresh speech, went timidly towards the door, anxious to escape now that she could not get any satisfactory solution of the mystery which involved them all.

Sir Robert met her at the door, opened it for her, and smiled as she went out.

"We will have a long talk in the morning, you and I," he said in a confidential tone as she went out.

And the last thing the girl heard as she passed into the hall was a wail of despair and distress from her mother as she sank again into a chair.

Margaret hesitated, distressed by the sound, and uncertain whether her mother would like to have her by her side again. But Sir Robert shut the door gently before she could make up her mind, and she went sorrowfully upstairs to her room.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACKMAILER'S DOUBLE

IN the meantime Auckland St. Gowan had hurried back to the Castle as fast as his legs could carry him, brimming over with excite-

ment at the meeting he had just had with the interesting stranger.

The first person he met on entering the park was his sister Agneta, a merry-faced girl of about twenty years of age, not pretty by any regular canons of beauty, but gifted with such a store of vivacity and full enjoyment of life that her large mouth, her irregular nose, and her small, merry eyes became so many charms in a face that was attractive in spite of nature.

She ran to meet her brother, whom she adored, and saw at once that he had something to tell her.

"Neta," said he, as he thrust his arm within hers and turned to go slowly in the direction of the Castle, "I've had an adventure."

"I knew it," said she. "But you must make haste, for dinner will be ready in ten minutes, and I've been waiting for you instead of going in to dress."

"I've met an old uncle of the Blairs. It's taken a weight off my mind, for it is as we always thought: there is nothing in Mrs. Blair's affectation of reserve. It seems she didn't get on well with her husband in his lifetime, and that this seclusion in which she lives is her own whim, and quite without cause."

"Good—as far as it goes," said Agneta; "but it won't be enough for papa and mamma. But perhaps we can get this uncle to come and see them, and to tell them everything?"

"He is quite ready," said Auckland, "if his sister allows him to do so. I suggested it myself at once; and he will be glad to come if only Mrs. Blair will let him. As he says, he can't very well do anything but yield to her wishes while he is staying with her."

"What is he like?"

"An awfully nice man, distinguished-looking, although he is a little fellow. Just the sort of man one would have expected their

near relation to be. Aren't you pleased to hear this?"

Agneta, whose merry eyes for once looked rather grave, hesitated.

"I don't know," she said slowly, at last. "It seems rather odd, doesn't it, that he should submit to her whims in that way if he sees, as he must see, that she is making herself ridiculous in keeping up such an air of mystery about her and her children?"

"Well, yes, that occurred to me even when he was speaking about it. I should have thought a man would have put his foot down in such a matter and made short work of her mysteries. But then I considered, as I came back, and I wondered whether perhaps he is dependent upon his sister for money, and whether he might be obliged to put up with her caprices on that account."

Agneta nodded sagely.

"A very good suggestion," said she, "but it won't satisfy mamma, I'm sure. She was very nice this afternoon, speaking about Nigel in the sweetest way after he had gone. But still I noticed that whatever she said, she always ended by implying that he would have to be frank with her, and to tell her all about his family before—well, you know what, Auckland, don't you?"

Her brother looked grave in his turn.

"Of course they must let us know who they are," he said petulantly. "But I think Sir Robert, as he told me to call him, understands that. I've put my faith in him, and I think he'll get us all out of the difficulty we've been placed in by Mrs. Blair's extraordinary reserve."

"You don't think there's any real reason for it?"

Auckland frowned.

"I don't want to think there is," he said in a low voice.

"Auckland, that's just what I feel," whispered she. "I don't want to think there's anything in

it, but it's hard to believe that a sane woman would have kept up a secret for years and years if there were nothing but caprice in it."

The two young people walked soberly towards the Castle, and were met as they went in by a servant who brought a note to the young lady.

Her face fell as she took it and saw that it was from Nigel. Tearing open the hastily-written note, she read this—

"MY DEAR AGNETA,

"The blow which has just fallen upon us is one that must shatter our lives, Meg's and mine, altogether, to say nothing of the hopes of happiness I had begun only this afternoon to look upon as solid and secure. I can't tell you what has happened. I can only say that it is something I could not possibly have foreseen or prepared for. I am going away, and I can never come back, never hope to see you again except as a stranger. What has happened is absolute and irreparable ruin to us all. I wish to heaven I could tell you more, but the secret is bound up in that of others, and I can say no more than I have said. I heartily beg of you to forgive me for anything I may have said to you when I believed that happiness was still possible to us, even under certain disadvantages. If this is incoherent or puzzling, I beg you to forgive me. I scarcely know what I am writing. I am unhappier than I had ever thought it possible for a human being to be.

"NIGEL BLAIR.

'P. S.—My name is not 'Blair.' I had begun to hope I might some day be able to tell you what my real name is, but now that hope, too, is destroyed. I must bear to the end of my life the name I have signed.

"N. B."

Agneta read this note through slowly, for the writing was so bad

as to be scarcely legible. Then she handed it to her brother, who read it also.

But it roused him to anger.

"A man has no right to write like this," he said. "He could trust you with the secret, no matter how many other persons were concerned in it. I shall see Sir Robert again in the morning, and insist upon the truth from him."

Agneta shrugged her shoulders.

"You won't get in," she said drily, as she went into the mansion.

But Auckland knew his sister better than to suppose that, because she gave little outward sign of emotion, she was not suffering deeply from this blow. It had long been evident to the young people themselves that sooner or later there would have to be a family explanation of some sort with regard to their feelings for the two young Blairs, and that day, to their intense delight, Nigel, on calling at the Castle, had ventured for the first time to speak openly to Lady St. Gowan about his feelings for Agneta, and had been encouraged by the viscountess to think that he might hope.

Nothing had been said by either concerning the mystery which hung over his family, but he had not on that account supposed that he would not have to make some sort of statement to the St. Gowan before being formally permitted to contract an engagement with their daughter.

Now, however, at one blow all was changed; he was evidently in despair, and though Auckland told his sister he would get Sir Robert to clear things up, it was in the deadliest of low spirits that both he and Agneta passed the evening.

The depression from which they both suffered was greatly increased when Lord St. Gowan, going out for his evening walk after dinner, returned to the Castle in a state of high excitement, de-

claring that he had just received a shock.

On being questioned, he stated that he had seen outside the park gates, at a little distance from him, a man so like the worst scoundrel he had ever known, a villain, a blackmailer, and a rascal of the vilest type, that although he knew the man in question to have been dead for many years, the sight of his double had filled him with horror and disgust.

"What was he like, sir?" asked Auckland, whose face had grown suddenly very white.

"Oh, he was a little slender fellow, with nothing more distinctive about him than a certain well-bred air," said Lord St. Gowan as he turned away.

"That's Sir Robert!" whispered Auckland to his sister, with a shiver.

CHAPTER VIII

NIGEL'S STRANGE LETTER

It was in the saloon of Sidford Castle that Lord St. Gowan made the startling statement which filled both his son and daughter with so much uneasiness that for a few moments they could only stare furtively at each other without speaking after Auckland's hurried whisper.

The saloon was a vast apartment belonging to the old part of the castle, a building which had stood a siege in King Charles's time. The marks of bullet and cannon-ball were still to be seen in some parts of the stout stone walls, and the place was pointed out where the ladies of the family, then holding the place for the king, had stood, while they personally helped to load the cannon against Cromwell's forces.

The end of the siege had been a tragic one for the defenders, and

although a large part of the old castle had been restored into a stately modern dwelling-house, there was many a fragment of ruined masonry and many a breach in the outer wall to show the extent to which it had suffered for its loyalty.

Part of the ruins were grown over, making irregularities in the ground surrounding the castle, increasing its picturesqueness as well as offering an object-lesson of the chances and changes of war.

Some new portions had been added on one side of the castle, but the great banqueting hall, the saloon, and the entrance hall were almost as they had been three hundred years before in shape and size, although modern comfort and luxury had somewhat modified their old appearance.

The windows had been lowered a little so that they now extended from the roof to within three feet of the floor, their deep embrasures filled with cushions covered with rich embroidery.

It was in one of the seats thus formed that Agneta was sitting when her father came in from his walk. Auckland was playing with his mother's Aberdeen terriers at a little distance away; while Lady St. Gowan herself, a placid, reposeful figure in pale grey satin, with pearls round her throat and old lace about her shoulders and hair, knitted quietly in a special corner of her own near one of the windows, where a magnificent Japanese screen shut her into a nook where work-basket and book and letter-case lay ready to her hand.

The lady looked up over her gold-rimmed glasses at her husband.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, surprised and interested by his tone, "and who was that, John?"

Lord St. Gowan came across the room to her with a slight frown of distaste still on his face.

"Oh, my dear, it doesn't matter.

The fellow's been dead a good many years, as I said, and it would do no good to recall a very horrible old story."

More interested than ever, though with proper wifely submissiveness in her tone and manner, Lady St. Gowan laid down her knitting and said—

"And you say this man you saw to-night is like him?"

"So extraordinarily like him that, if I were not absolutely sure that the other fellow was dead, I should have no hesitation in saying that I saw him to-night."

"Perhaps he isn't dead, after all," suggested the lady, who saw that, in spite of his refusal to name the villain of whom he spoke, her husband found the subject too interesting to be dropped at once.

"Oh yes, he is, luckily," said Lord St. Gowan, now directly addressing his wife, and unaware that the two younger members of the family were listening to his words with all their ears. "If he were not, and if he were in the neighbourhood, I would never rest until I had driven him out of the county."

Lady St. Gowan's gentle face puckered up into an expression of great surprise. It was the viscount's way to be emphatic in discussing any matter in which he was interested, but it was unusual to see him so much excited as he now appeared to be.

In the meantime the two young people were careful not to betray by the slightest sign, even by an upward look or a word, the deep interest they both felt in their father's words. But it was with the keenest ears that they heard his answer when Lady St. Gowan, looking intently at her husband, asked—

"And what can it have been that this man had done to make you feel so strongly?"

"There is nothing that a decent

man avoids doing which the rascal left undone," was her husband's emphatic reply. "And there is only one excuse which it is possible to make for him, one that has, I believe, been made: that he was mad."

Lady St. Gowan looked troubled. She could not but fear, from the strength and vigour of her husband's denunciation, that more had passed between him and the stranger than he had confessed to them. She did not, indeed, go so far as to believe that he had seen in the flesh the scoundrel of whose doings in the past he spoke so strongly. But she thought that something more must have happened than she had been told. Perhaps Lord St. Gowan had pursued the stranger, had exchanged some words with him, and had been offended by the manner in which he was answered.

She tried to divert his attention from the incident which had moved him so strongly.

"Nigel Blair was here this afternoon, John," she said, dropping her voice to a confidential tone, and glancing with a smile in the direction of her daughter. "He was telling me about a successful attempt to make a real Italian pergola somewhere in Warwickshire."

"Warwickshire!" exclaimed the viscount sharply.

Lady St. Gowan looked astonished again. What was there to offend him in the name of that particular county?

"Yes, I think it was Warwickshire. Somewhere in the Midlands, I know."

But her husband was scarcely listening. It was certain that the name had suggested something unpleasant to him, and for a few minutes, during which his son and daughter watched him furtively, he stood staring out of the window nearest to him at the undulating

grounds, with a frown of mistrust and suspicion upon his face.

Then he turned abruptly towards the lady again.

"And what was Nigel doing in Warwickshire?" he asked in a tone of so much asperity that she looked quite confused; and a flush came into her gentle face as she answered—

"I really don't know that he himself was in Warwickshire at all. He didn't say so. He was telling me about something he had heard of that was tried there."

"I see."

"He knows how interested I am in roses, and that anything which concerns flowers is of pleasure to me."

Lord St. Gowan, still with the same uneasy frown on his face, asked rather sharply—

"Why was he here to-day?"

Lady St. Gowan grew slightly offended at this persistent examination, and the tone in which the questions were put.

"He very often comes to see me," she answered rather stiffly, "as I'm sure you must know. Nigel and I are great friends."

The viscount's eyes wandered towards his daughter, and then looked again out of the window.

"There is no need for him to come so often," he said coldly. "A young man of his age ought to have something better to do than to spend his time idling on our lawn or his mother's."

Everybody in the room was astonished at this outburst, and a sense of gloom and vague distress spread rapidly over them all.

Agneta grew very pale; and although she gave no other sign of distress, her brother, who knew every change in her sensitive face, understood the deep pain which these words caused her.

Both brother and sister could see that this mood of their father's would prove to be the precursor

of important movements. They had been on terms of friendly intimacy for many years with the family at Rock Hall, having almost forgotten by this time the curious air of mystery and suspicion which at first had surrounded the beautiful widow and her children. Now both Agneta and Auckland perceived that, as it seemed, in consequence of the incident of their father's meeting with the stranger, the happy friendship between the two families was to come to an end.

There could be no doubt as to the reason of the viscount's sudden change of front.

Until that night he had been as warm in praise of the family at Rock Hall as his wife, his son, or his daughter. Not until the unhappy meeting with the mysterious stranger that evening had he given, by word or look, any intimation that Nigel's visits were other than welcome, or that there was anything to be said against his manner of passing his time.

Lady St. Gowan's hands trembled as she took up her knitting. She had been very gracious to Nigel that afternoon, and when he had falteringly expressed his feelings for Agneta she had listened with the utmost sympathy and kindness, and had done her best by word and look to encourage him in the hopes he so diffidently made known to her.

She had, indeed, long since discussed with the viscount the evident affection between Agneta and Nigel on the one hand, and between Auckland and Margaret on the other. The latter passion had, in particular, their conspicuous approval, for they both looked upon Margaret as the ideal of lovely womanhood, and knew that, with her as his wife, their somewhat erratic son would stand a far better chance of happiness than if he were to seek a consort among Chicago

heiresses or the beauties of the musical comedy stage, or even among the daughters of people of their own rank and position.

They had discussed, too, the mystery which hung over the Blairs, and had agreed that it would have to be cleared away before they could allow thoughts of an alliance between the families. But they had certainly not supposed that any serious impediment would arise to make the inter-marriages impossible, and therefore this change in the viscount's manner brought consternation to Lady St. Gowan as well as to her children.

Dead silence followed Lord St. Gowan's pronouncement, and resently Auckland, springing up from the chair on which he had been kneeling while he played with the dogs, suggested to his sister a game at billiards.

Agreeing to this by signs rather than words, Agneta, who was in a state of concealed agitation of which only her brother was aware, accompanied him out of the room, leaving the Lord and Lady St. Gowan together.

But once outside the saloon, Auckland drew his sister's hand through his arm and led her into the long picture gallery, where, while they walked up and down in the soft light of the sunset which streamed through the western windows, they discussed what they had just heard, and made their own comments upon the news.

"It's the same man, of course, that you saw—the man who said he was Mrs. Blair's brother?" said Agneta in a whisper.

"Oh yes, there's no doubt of that. The description tallies exactly. Little man, with nothing distinctive about him except an air of good breeding. Yes, that's the man I met, and the one my father saw, undoubtedly."

Agneta looked round her carefully before going on. Then she

put her lips close to her brother's ear.

"And—it's really the man papa took him for I suppose?" she said.

Auckland frowned.

"Well, it does look like it," he admitted. "But one doesn't want to think so."

"Oh, what does it matter what one wants when one knows that it is so?" said Agneta impatiently. "I don't see how there can be any doubt about it, and I'm very much afraid papa thinks as I do."

"I'm afraid so, too."

"Auckland, it's true, true, true! This man is the same that papa knew; and it is his coming that has made poor Nigel write as he does. What does it mean? Who is he? What is going to happen to them all?"

But her brother was as much in the dark as she. He, however, having seen the visitor at Rock Hall, and conversed with him, found it difficult to believe that he could be the man of whom his father had spoken so ill. There was a winning gentleness and courtesy, a pleasant humour and an attractive air of good breeding about the man who had represented himself as Mrs. Blair's brother, which made the young man loth to accept the possibility of his identity with the scoundrel of whom his father had spoken.

"My father may have been mistaken," he said quickly. "This gentleman is as unlike a villain as anybody I ever met."

"You can't always tell by a man's looks, though, whether he is a good or a bad character," said his sister sagely. "On the contrary, I suppose the villains wouldn't be able to work their villainy if they didn't look perfectly sweet and virtuous."

"Well then," said Auckland desperately, "don't you see where your contention leads? If this Sir Robert, as he told me to call him,

is what my father described—a blackmailer—and if Nigel says he has no further hopes of happiness and that he must run away and hide himself, it follows that Nigel must have committed some crime, or done something which he can't afford to have known, and that this Sir Robert it is whose coming has forced him to run away."

But Agneta's eyes flashed at the suggestion.

"Nigel has done nothing wrong," she said indignantly. "I'm sure of that. If any wrong has been done it has been by some one else."

"May I look at his letter again?"

She took it out and gave it to him reluctantly, and Auckland, seating himself in one of the window seats, crossed his legs, bent his elbows on his knees, and considered it attentively.

"There's a good deal that is puzzling in this," he said at last. "I see he admits he is passing under a name which is not his own, but says he had always hoped that some day he could use his own. Now, I wonder what he means by that? Why should the coming of this man have made it hopeless for him ever to hope to use his own name? One would think that, if this visitor were a relation so disreputable as not to dare to give his own name, and to have made it impossible for his relations to be known by theirs, he would have been refused admittance into the house by the Blairs."

"They may have been afraid to refuse him," suggested Agneta.

"Nonsense! If they had been in dread of him on account of his character, it was he who had the most to fear from a meeting. If he has committed some crime they can always threaten him with the police."

"What! If he is their own relation?"

"Yes. It would be a matter for arrangement between the family

and their lawyers on the one side, and him on the other. You see, if he were a wholly unrepresentable person, which is the last thing suggested by his appearance and manners, it would be his object to get what he could out of the family without troubling them with his presence."

"I don't see that. He might think it easier to frighten them personally into paying him money to go away than to threaten them from a distance."

Auckland slapped his knee impatiently.

"I can't believe the man I saw—Sir Robert—is that sort of person. I took a great fancy to him; in fact a much greater fancy than I ever took to Mrs. Blair. And I think, from what he said, that Meg has taken just as great a fancy to him as I did."

"Meg took a fancy to him! Did she know who he was?"

"Yes; she knew he was her uncle, and seemed glad to have a relation as nice as he. And I must tell you that he was so frank, so much puzzled and annoyed by Mrs. Blair's airs of mystery and secrecy, that I was congratulating myself on his having come. He said he was going to try to persuade his sister to end this meaningless seclusion, and he said how glad he should be if he could come and see my people. But of course he admitted that he couldn't well come to us without Mrs. Blair's permission while he was staying under her roof."

"Perhaps all that wasn't true," said Agneta. "If I were you, Auckland, I should meet him and get him to walk somewhere near here, so that papa may see him again. Then we shall know, once for all, who he is and why he is come; at least, we shall know if he is the awful person papa described."

But Auckland moved uneasily.

"I daren't risk it," he said at last

hoarsely. "Just think what it might mean to the Blairs if it should really prove to be true, if he should be the scoundrel my father described and if I should be helping to give them away! How could I do it?"

But Agneta was not persuaded.

"You say yourself there is nothing in the story," she persisted. "You believe this Sir Robert to be a nice man, and you think that all the fault of the mystery and the secrecy is Mrs. Blair's."

"I can't be sure of that, but I am inclined to think that may be so," said her brother cautiously.

Both were silent for some minutes. At last the girl spoke.

"Auckland," she said in a whisper, "I believe papa does connect the man he saw with Rock Hall, or why should he have spoken so disagreeably about Nigel? And what had he in his mind when Warwickshire was mentioned?"

"That was what I was wondering myself. I suppose it is somewhere in Warwickshire that Nigel disappears to when he goes away on those mysterious journeys of his. I wonder"—and his face changed as he came over and bent to speak low in his sister's ear—"whether Nigel is subject to fits of mania, and whether he is shut up when he is supposed to go away!"

But Agneta was hot at this suggestion.

"Nigel mad!" she exclaimed with flashing eyes. "Why the idea is ridiculous! A madman gives some signs of madness, even during his lucid intervals. Now, pray, what sign of lunacy have you ever seen in Nigel—the nicest, gentlest, most amiable man in the county?"

Auckland spoke in a soothing tone

"Don't get so angry, Neta. I'm only trying to find out the meaning of this mystery. There must be some reason, must there not, for these curious journeys he takes so often, and for the fact that not even

you, with all your curiosity and all your attraction for him, have ever managed to get him to tell you where he goes?"

Agneta answered with the tears in her eyes.

"I know that; but I'll never believe your suggestion is the truth. I'll never believe that he is mad. Besides, does the notion tally with this letter?"

And she took it out of her brother's hand and read it again with feverish eagerness.

But Auckland answered gently—

"I'm afraid it does, Neta. That letter could scarcely have been written by any one who was entirely sane."

The girl shook her head.

"I don't agree with you. It seems to me to be full of misery, but not of madness. There is nothing really incoherent in it. And besides, why should he talk as if a blow had fallen upon him for the first time when, if your suggestion were true, it has fallen very often? If he had written this letter to me in despair because he felt his madness coming on him again, he must have felt the same fifty times before, whenever he had to go away! But you know that has not been so; he has always gone away and come back again without our noticing any change in him. He is always just the same grave, kind, sweet-tempered fellow, old and serious for his age, but always sweet and good. Don't tell me he's mad; I won't believe it!"

A soft step at the other end of the gallery startled them both, and before Agneta could fold up and put away the open letter from Nigel which lay in her lap, Lady St. Gowan had come in and asked what it was.

Agneta, confused, would have put the letter away with the answer that it was "nothing," but something in the way in which she folded

it, some look or blush which caught the mother's eye, betrayed her, and Lady St. Gowan marched her daughter off with her to her own room, and there demanded again to see the letter.

Then Agneta faced her mother boldly.

"I'd rather not show it to you, mamma," she said. "It is from Nigel Blair, written when he was evidently in a state of great distress and not in cold blood."

But her mother insisted. So Agneta, holding fast the letter with both hands and pressing it against her breast, answered steadily—

"Very well; I will show it to you if you wish. But I won't talk about it, or explain it, or discuss it. I'll just say this: whatever you may say about it, or whatever papa may say, can't alter my feelings for Nigel. I love him. I've known it a long time, and, mamma—I must say it—you must have known it, too. I can't think it possible that you and papa have let us all grow up together without realizing how it must end, that Auckland and Meg would get fond of each other, and Nigel and I. Nothing has happened but what you might have foreseen. And if now papa tries to pretend he knew nothing about it, and if you do, too, and if you think you can make us forget all we've been learning and feeling these last few years, you are wrong, mamma. We can't do it, and we wouldn't if we could."

She ended panting for breath, and handed Nigel's letter to her mother. Lady St. Gowan read it with frightened eyes, and gave it back to her daughter in acute dismay.

"What is this blow he talks about?" she asked under her breath.

Agneta hung her head.

"An uncle of theirs has arrived," she said in a low voice, "whose coming has caused dissension, I believe."

"An uncle!" exclaimed Lady St. Gowan. "I thought they had no relatives living!"

"We thought so, too; but Auckland met this gentleman in the grounds to-day. He was very charming and nice, said how much he regretted that his sister, Mrs. Blair, should shut herself up as she did, that there was no necessity for it, that it was only a whim, and that he should try to cure her of it."

Lady St. Gowan was looking perplexed. Strangers were rare in the neighbourhood, and instantly and inevitably she began to connect the account her husband had given of his meeting with a stranger that evening and this story of an unexpected and mysterious uncle.

On the whole she found the news disquieting.

"There must be something wrong either about the uncle or the nephew if the coming of the one drives away the other!" she suggested shrewdly, after a long silence.

"Then it is the uncle who is in fault," said Agneta quickly.

Lady St. Gowan looked doubtful.

"I hope so, I'm sure," she said gloomily. "But—I don't know what your father will say."

"He can say nothing to alter my feeling for Nigel!" cried Agneta passionately.

"Well, as he's gone away, that doesn't so much matter," retorted Lady St. Gowan as she gave her daughter a little vapid kiss on the forehead, and dismissed her.

Agneta went to her own room with a heavy load at her heart. She had always been accustomed to confide in her mother, but she felt that she had a right to resent this change of front on Lady St. Gowan's part at the bidding of her husband. Nigel had always been a welcome visitor at the castle, and the mystery of his frequent absences, while it had been discussed by the St. Gowan family, had never caused them

to ask for any other than the explanation always given by Mrs. Blair, that he was away on business.

Agneta did not often shed tears, but her pillow was wet that night before she went to sleep.

CHAPTER IX

UNCLE ROBERT

IN the meantime the unwelcome visitor at Rock Hall had been busy improving his position there. He had gained the good-will of every member of the household, with the single exception of its mistress, before he retired to rest in the principal spare bedroom, a charming apartment with an outlook over the lawn and the sea beyond.

Accustomed as the servants were to the gloomy reserve of their mistress, and to the staid, dignified taciturnity of their young master, Nigel, they were delighted by the pleasant manners, the genial smiles, the courteous words of the guest, and although they were all shrewd enough to see that his coming had been an unpleasant surprise to Mrs. Blair and her son, they none of them shared her feelings or sympathized greatly with her distress.

There was, indeed, in the house-keeper's room and the servants' hall a certain amount of gossip concerning the prompt disappearance of Nigel Blair, but as they were used to his frequent unexplained absences, this fact did not cause them so much surprise as it would otherwise have done.

There remained one person to whom the arrival of the stranger meant nothing but joy.

Margaret, docile as she was and submissive to her mother's wishes,

had rebelled too often and too hotly against the ignorance of her family's affairs in which he was kept, not to rejoice in the coming of a relative who was able and willing to tell her something, at least, of what she wanted to know. It was from him that she learned all the little she knew about her father; that he had not got on well with her mother; that in the quarrels between them there had been faults on both sides; that Sir Robert had taken the husband's part, and Nigel that of his mother; that jealousy had been the cause of the quarrels; and finally that there had been some sort of explosion, some scandal, and then that her father had gone out of his mind and that he had died mad.

A fearful story, even told in this bare fashion, and Margaret shuddered as she thought of it. Ought she to believe implicitly the account of the stranger without having heard anything of the other side of the story? The girl did ask herself this question; but, in view of the fact that her mother told her nothing, it was impossible for Meg not to feel that she was being insensibly drawn to take part against her taciturn and cold-mannered mother, and to espouse the cause of that unknown father whose hot temper had been the cause of so much misery to himself at least.

The consequence of this state of feeling was that Margaret felt more and more attracted to her uncle, so that when, on the following morning, she saw him on the lawn under her window beckoning to her to come out and enjoy the fresh morning air, she hurried her dressing and ran out to meet him with a guilty feeling of disloyalty to her mother, but with undisguised pleasure in her uncle's society.

"You lazy girl!" was his good-humoured greeting as she shook hands with him. "I've been up an hour, and if only I'd been sure

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which was your room I would have flung a handful of stones at your window to have you out. But I was afraid," he went on in an awestruck whisper, "that I might light upon mamma's window instead. And imagine how frightened I should have been if I had seen her majestic face and form glaring at me out of a window! I believe I should have run away!"

Margaret could not help laughing at his little joke.

"I do hope," she said wistfully, "that you and my mother will become good friends, and that you will persuade her to be frank with me and with the St. Gowans, our dearest friends. You can't think what it would mean to Nigel and to all of us if she would."

The visitor smiled genially.

"I think I can guess," said he. "I suppose it is not only a question of your happiness and young St. Gowan's, but of Nigel's and that of Lord St. Gowan's daughter?"

"Who told you that?" asked Margaret in surprise.

"Perhaps it wasn't very difficult to come to that conclusion," said he. "In the meantime, why on earth has your brother run away?" he added irritably.

But his irritability was not disagreeable, and Margaret smiled.

"I really don't know," said she. "Nobody ever tells me anything."

"We must put an end to such a state of things as you describe," said Sir Robert with decision. "It's most unfair. Nor do I see what is gained by all this secrecy about her past. There was nothing whatever of a discreditable nature in it, and to hush up misfortunes which she has endured in bygone days is a fatal mistake. People would be sorry for her if they knew all her story, whereas this attempt at concealment—for it can never be more than an attempt—is calculated to alienate even her own friends."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes! You're

quite right. I only hope you'll be able to convince her of that," said Margaret earnestly.

"And your brother: can you give me any idea where he's gone?" asked Sir Robert curiously.

Margaret shook her head.

"I have no idea at all," said she. "I can only tell you this, that he divides his time almost regularly into two halves; half the year he is away and the other half he is here. But the intervals are irregular; it is only the bulk of the time that comes out pretty fairly in two halves, so that one half is spent with us and the other half away."

Sir Robert listened attentively and nodded.

"And you have no idea where he goes, or what he does with his time while he is away from you?"

"Not in the least. He is ridiculously silent about it, not only to me but to Agneta St. Gowan, whom he is so fond of. She has often told me so."

There was, however, a look in Sir Robert's face which made Margaret think that these absences were not so puzzling to him as they were to her. And presently, with a flush in her face, she said suddenly:

"Uncle, if you don't know where he goes and what he does, I'm sure you can make a very good guess."

The expression on his face had changed. From being interested he had become exceedingly grave and even disturbed.

She looked at him keenly, ready to ask another question if she dared. But before she could summon courage to frame it, one of the lower windows of the house was suddenly thrust open, and Mrs. Blair came out, much more quickly than usual, and with anger and disgust on her worn, handsome face.

She made an imperious sign to Margaret, whose last words she had perhaps heard before she came out.

"Go indoors," she said sharply. "Leave me with your—uncle."

Margaret, with a heavy heart and an air of pained resentment, went into the house by way of the French window which her mother had left open. It was very early, not yet nine o'clock, and she was surprised to hear the sound of a horse's hoofs on the gravel in front of the house. She had scarcely gone the length of the long room, with the intention of leaving it by the further door, when Lord St. Gowan entered.

Margaret, who was a great favourite with the viscount, was hurt to see that he looked at her with grave eyes instead of with the indulgent smile he usually had ready for her.

"I must apologize," said he, "for this very early visit; but I usually ride a little way before breakfast, and I thought I would venture to call in the hope of having a few words with Mrs. Blair. I hear your brother has gone away—rather suddenly?"

"Ye—es," faltered Margaret, her head drooping.

"Can you explain it? I am not asking out of idle curiosity, of course."

Margaret, white and frightened, answered truthfully:

"I believe he has gone away because an uncle of ours, my mother's brother, arrived unexpectedly yesterday afternoon. I think they have had some disagreement in the past, and that Nigel did not care to stay in the same house with him."

Lord St. Gowan's face had darkened strangely.

"And is your uncle staying with you now? I should be much pleased to make his acquaintance," he said.

Something in the eager look of Lord St. Gowan's face suddenly warned the girl to be cautious. She turned very white and hesitated to reply.

"He is in the garden—with my

mother," she stammered nervously.

Lord St. Gowan walked quickly towards the window, and Margaret, with sudden alarm, went, too. It was with relief she saw that both her mother and uncle had disappeared. The viscount turned to her with suspicion in her eyes.

"Unexpected, you say this visit was?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Your brother spoke of it as a blow. Do you know why?"

Margaret hesitated. Hating the maze of mysteries in which she found herself involved, she felt that the best thing to do was to be frank as far as she was able. So she raised her head and meeting his eyes boldly, said:

"I understand that long ago, when there were quarrels between my father and my mother, my uncle took my father's part and my brother took my mother's. And the feeling between them is still very strong."

Lord St. Gowan listened with the deepest interest. Then he said, in the tone of a cross-examining counsel:

"And how long is it since your father died?"

"I don't know; I have never known. But I know that he died mad, in an asylum."

Lord St. Gowan's eyes were fixed intently upon her face, as if he were in the mood to question every word. Then he said more gently:

"Thank you. I'm sorry if I've had to recall a painful subject. But I hate mysteries, and I thought I had a right to know so much as I have asked. And now to meet your uncle."

He went towards the window, and again Margaret went, too. Just as they reached it, the girl saw Sir Robert spring away from her mother's side and disappear into the house by the garden door. Lord St. Gowan put on his glasses, looking vexed.

"My brother hasn't shaved yet, and declines to be presented to you unshaven," said Mrs. Blair, holding out her hand with a nervous smile.

CHAPTER X

LORD ST. GOWAN'S ULTIMATUM

It was quite evident, from the coldness with which Lord St. Gowan shook hands, that he was not satisfied by this explanation.

And it was equally evident that Mrs. Blair gave it nervously, that she was ill at ease and anxious to discover from the viscount's manner whether he was satisfied with the excuse she gave.

Plainly he was not. Margaret, who had known, partly by instinct and partly by reasoning, that it was undesirable that her uncle should be seen by the visitor, was sure that this was the case. Sir Robert was exceedingly agile, and as he approached the drawing-room with Mrs. Blair he had heard the voices inside, and had been prepared for flight. The consequence was that he skipped away so nimbly, before Lord St. Gowan had time to put on his glasses, that he was inside the house by another door almost as soon as Margaret caught sight of him.

"I'm very anxious to have the pleasure of making your brother's acquaintance, Mrs. Blair," said the viscount coldly.

There was an awkward pause when he had finished speaking. Both the ladies were aghast at what was revealed by his tone and manner. In the first place, if he could scarcely be said to put any special emphasis upon her name, he yet uttered it in such a tone as to betray to the quick ears

of the ladies that he was aware for the first time that the surname they used was not really their own. Mrs. Blair looked down; Margaret gazed at him with open apprehension.

At last Mrs. Blair said:

"He is most anxious to meet you, Lord St. Gowan. He has already met Auckland, and he is delighted with him. My brother has been abroad for some years and he is full of enthusiasm for England and the English now he has come back."

Lord St. Gowan was looking both puzzled and displeased. He took the seat his hostess offered him, much to her dismay, as she had been hoping that he would cut this early visit very short.

"Yes, and Auckland was just as pleased with him as he was with Auckland, I understand," said the viscount in the same tone as before, a tone as different as possible from his usual cordiality and kindness to Mrs. Blair. "That is why I am so anxious to meet Sir Robert. By the bye, I don't think Auckland caught the rest of his name?"

If his tone and manner had left any room for doubt that he was angry, mistrustful, and suspicious, the viscount betrayed by the look with which he accompanied these words that they were in the nature of a challenge. He looked full at his hostess, and not a tinge of extra colour in her pale cheeks, not a quiver of the eyelids, not a twitching of her hands escaped him as he kept her closely under watch.

Mrs. Blair was disconcerted, and did not at once answer. Lord St. Gowan sat back a little without saying another word, plainly intending to remain silent until he got an answer.

Mrs. Blair made one attempt to avoid giving it.

"I don't think either of them heard the name of the other," she said with a smile. "As a matter

of fact, they only met in the drive and exchanged a few words together, before Meg sprang out upon them from one of the walks and stopped the conversation. Isn't that so, Meg?"

And she turned to her daughter.

"Yes, mammie," said Margaret. "Auckland gave me a book he had brought and went away."

But Lord St. Gowan was not to be put off.

"Well, they took a great fancy to each other, short as their interview was," he said. "But what did you say your brother's name was?"

A deadly pallor spread over Mrs. Blair's features. The fact was that she had forgotten the name her detested guest had assumed. She rose and went towards the door.

"I will see if he can come in now and tell you himself what his name is," she said with a miserable attempt at playfulness as she turned the handle. "He is just as anxious to meet you as you can be to meet him."

With that she left the room, and Lord St. Gowan, with an air of scarcely concealed impatience, rose to his feet.

"What is your uncle's name?" he asked Margaret point-blank.

Of course the girl was infinitely distressed by the necessity thus thrust upon her of giving the name which her mother appeared to be anxious to withhold. The real reason why it had not been given by Mrs. Blair was one which Margaret was not likely to guess, the possibility that her mother should not know the name of her own brother not having occurred to the girl. Whatever her mother's reasons might be, Margaret dared not refuse to answer the direct question.

"He is Sir Robert Kerslake," she said simply.

To her horror there flashed across the viscount's face a look which

suggested that it had some special significance for him. He did not speak for a few moments, but looked out before him as if trying to piece together the parts of some mental puzzle. Then, quite a long time after he had received the information he had asked for, he said very quietly:

"Thank you."

But still he did not attempt to start an ordinary conversation. He waited patiently, glancing again and again at the door, until at last he said:

"Is Sir Robert going to stay here long?"

"I don't know at all," said Meg, who was feeling sick and frightened without knowing exactly why.

Again there was a long pause, but Lord St. Gowan, although he looked two or three times at his watch, gave no sign of an intention to take his leave.

Poor Margaret, evidently ill at ease, made some attempt to carry on an ordinary conversation with him, but he answered her so shortly that tears of vexation rose to her eyes, and she wished she dared tell him what she knew to be the truth, that he would not be allowed to meet Sir Robert.

When the tension had become quite painful, Mrs. Blair came in again, apologized profusely for her brother, who was out of sorts and had had to lie down for a little while.

A peculiar smile appeared on the viscount's face.

"I shall hope for an early opportunity of making the acquaintance of Sir Robert Kerslake," he said stiffly, as he took his leave.

Margaret's heart seemed to sink within her, for she knew by the viscount's manner that the knell was being sounded of the old friendship between the two families. She knew that her uncle was not to meet Lord St. Gowan, and that the story of his illness had been invented. To confirm this a small incident was

enough. As she crossed the hall on leaving the drawing-room, she saw that the door of the study was ajar, and that there was some one just inside watching the departure of the visitor. It was her uncle, she was sure.

Disgusted with him, with her mother, with Nigel, with the horrible atmosphere of mystery which seemed to grip her by the throat and strangle her, Margaret went upstairs to her own room, shut herself in, and refusing to come downstairs to breakfast on the plea of a headache, sat brooding over her misery until mid-day.

For what did the morning's incidents portend? Nothing short of complete alienation between the two families of Rock Hall and Sidford Castle; and Sidford Castle to poor Margaret meant—Auckland St. Gowan.

In the meantime the viscount rode home exasperated, perplexed, and more determined than ever to probe to the heart of the mystery. Even before he could do this, however, there was a step to be taken, which he took without delay. Lady St. Gowan, her son, and her daughter, were all in the breakfast-room when the viscount came back from his ride, and not one of them could fail to see that something had gone gravely wrong with him. He suffered breakfast to be eaten without his having declared himself. Everybody, however, was exceedingly uncomfortable throughout the meal, and the flood of June sunshine which streamed into the pretty bright room and showed up the coloured sporting prints on the walls and the bright flowers of the cretonne hangings showed also the looks of subdued anxiety on every face.

When breakfast was over Lord St. Gowan rose, but, instead of leaving the room, beckoned to the viscountess to follow him to the window, at the same time address-

ing these words to his son and daughter:

"I want a few words with you both, if you please."

The two young people exchanged a furtive glance of anxiety and dismay.

Lord St. Gowan went on:

"I think"—and he cast a searching look first at his son and then at his daughter—"you are neither of you unprepared for what I have to say. It concerns a family with whom we have been for many years on terms of intimacy, and I may add even of warm friendship. I regret to say that, having regard to certain circumstances connected with this family which have just come to my knowledge, the intimacy must now cease."

There was the look of the war-horse scenting the battle in Auckland's flashing eyes and dilated nostrils, but perhaps the change which came over the usually merry face of Agneta was more eloquent still. The girl's attitude was indicative of complete submission to her father's will as she stood with her head bent and her eyes cast down, listening respectfully to his words. But the unusual expression of her mouth, the absolute stillness with which she received this admonition betokened even more obstinacy than did her brother's passionate and open resentment.

There was a pause, and Lord St. Gowan appeared to expect some expression of acquiescence from the lips of his children; but neither spoke a word, and he presently said in a slightly harder tone:

"Do you hear me?"

Agneta's lips moved in assent, but Auckland, facing his father boldly, said in a tone which was as firm as the viscount's own:

"We are waiting, sir, to be told your reason for this change of attitude towards the Blairs."

"My reason!"

Lord St. Gowan's tone was cold and dignified, and he appeared to be about to insist upon his right to demand obedience without explanation. But Lady St. Gowan, ever ready by tactful suggestion to smooth over difficulties both social and domestic, interposed gently :

"My dear John, I'm sure you will think it fair that they should hear your reasons. They understand, of course, that your reasons are good ones ; but since the friendship has lasted so long and our children have grown up in it, I think you will be kind enough to let them know why you have been obliged to come to this painful decision."

It was all very stately, very dignified, conducted in as formal a manner as if the breakfast-room had been a court of justice. But the young people were chafing under the ponderous periods and stately cadences of their elders, and Agneta had to administer to her brother a warning pinch to keep him from bursting all bounds and defying his parents without more ado.

"Well," said Lord St. Gowan with an air of immense condescension, "I regret to say I have reason to believe that the family is passing under an assumed name."

"You wouldn't break off the acquaintance for nothing but that!" said Auckland sharply.

His father threw at him an indignant look, and his mother interposed again, rather more quickly this time :

"It is more than an acquaintance, Auckland, as you know," she said.

The interpolation gave him the opening he wanted.

"By Jove, it is!" burst out the young man hotly. "One doesn't talk about an acquaintance with the girl one's going to marry."

This was throwing down the glove with a vengeance. The whole family felt the shock ; but while their elders seemed to quiver at the audacity of the defiance,

Agneta raised her head serenely, conscious that, now the first step was taken, it would be easier for her as well as for her brother to show a bold front to the enemy.

"There can be no question of inter-marriage between the St. Gowan and the family at Rock Hall," said the viscount sternly, when he had recovered a little from the blow.

"I am sorry to have to say so, sir, but this change in your views has come too late. I've been fond of Margaret for a long time ; I've always understood that my marriage with her would have your approval, and it's too late for any change."

"Would you persist, in the face of our displeasure and your father's command?" asked Lady St. Gowan scarcely above her breath.

"I'm sorry to have to do it, but there's no alternative," said Auckland with spirit. "I must remind you that there's always been a mystery about the Blairs, that you must always have had your doubts, like other people, as to the name they went by being their own. I understand there was a mystery about them from the first : they were so evidently people of family and breeding, and yet one could find out nothing about them."

The viscount's voice broke in sternly :

"I have found out something about them."

"Since when?"

It was remarkable that, on Auckland's assuming the firm tone of an equal with his father for the first time, the viscount became a little less hard, a little less aloof in his bearing, though his tone and manner were as obstinate as ever. To his son's question he replied at once with perfect simplicity :

"I found out this morning that the person who calls himself Sir Robert Kerslake, and who is alleged to be Mrs. Blair's brother, avoids

a meeting with me. That fact alone would be enough, in my opinion, to prove that there is something wrong about the family. Taken in conjunction with the other mysterious circumstances about them, it is overwhelming proof that the family is not one for mine to be connected with."

"But all that is negative," persisted Auckland. "It may mean something important, it may mean nothing at all. May I suggest, sir, that you have something in your mind that you have not yet mentioned, something which seems to you stronger than any of these negative proofs of something wrong?"

The viscount hesitated a moment, and then admitted:

"Well, yes, there is something more. But I will not be pressed further. I have explained my objections sufficiently. There is only one thing more I will tell you, and that is Margaret told me herself her father died mad. To marry into a family tainted with insanity is an act of folly of which in these days no decent man ought to be capable."

Auckland persisted, however.

"But Margaret herself knows so little about her family, sir, that anything she tells you must be looked upon as lacking proof. She's incapable of falsehood, but she would believe anything they told her, and I for one should not accept such a statement as that from her until I found out who told her and in what circumstances."

But Lord St. Gowan was growing impatient.

"It appears impossible to convince you," he said impatiently; "but that is not of much consequence. The fact remains that the marriage you contemplated is impossible, and that it will not take place." He turned to his daughter. "And the same arguments that apply in Auckland's case apply also

in yours, Agneta. If you have felt any affection for Nigel you must conquer it. Whatever may be right or wrong about the rest of the family, I know for a fact that there is something gravely wrong about him. He has disappeared, in fact, and will probably not be heard of in this part of the world again."

Although Agneta was aware that it was through Nigel's own letter to herself, reported on by her mother, that Lord St. Gowan knew this fact, she was none the less disturbed at hearing these words from her father's lips.

They seemed to put the seal upon the misery she was suffering, and she suddenly broke down into such pitiful tears that Lady St. Gowan, touched to the quick, hurried her out of the room, trying to console her with words of affection and tenderness.

Auckland, however, stubborn to the last, submitted without a word to another short harangue from his father, and then, bowing ceremoniously, dashed off through the park on foot at a great rate in the direction of Rock Hall.

CHAPTER XI

IN SEARCH OF NIGEL

Now Margaret had expected a visit from Auckland, for her feminine acuteness told her that the first thing the viscount would do on reaching home would be to lecture his son and daughter, very much as he, in fact, had done.

She therefore kept watch from her own little sitting-room on the north side of the house, and caught the sound of Auckland's footsteps on the gravel of the drive even before he came in sight.

Springing to her feet and leaving the easel at which she was at work, she stood at the open window until

the young man appeared at the entrance of the avenue, and then, by signs, she directed him to turn into the orchard on his right hand and to wait for her there.

Margaret knew that if he were to see her mother there would be an unpleasant interview for both of them, while a certain vague mistrust of Sir Robert made her anxious that he should see no more of Auckland for the present.

Opening the door softly she hurried downstairs, slipped out into the garden and into the orchard, where Auckland was waiting for her under the apple trees. She ran to meet him with an expression on her face which made his own heart sink.

He had never asked her to marry him in so many words, but both had looked upon marriage as the inevitable ending to the attachment which grew stronger between them with every succeeding year.

Auckland had held his head up bravely during the scene with his father; he had been on fire with passionate anxiety to meet Margaret again as he dashed across the fields and lanes towards Rock Hall. Now that he was face to face with her, and once more under the spell of the charming presence that embodied all womanhood to him, the fear that he might lose her seized upon him so strongly that his face grew convulsed, his voice hoarse, his eyes haggard, as he stretched his arms towards her and whispered:

"Oh Meg! Meg! I won't give you up! Confound them all! Confound these mysteries and tricks! I love you. You won't give me up, Meg, will you? You'll marry me? You'll be my wife—my wife!"

She had met him by that time and he was holding her in his arms. She did not answer him directly, but burst into tears and said:

"I knew it! I knew it was coming. Oh, Auckland, what fools we've been! We ought to have

known that it would come, that it had to come."

Auckland held her away from him, and looked down anxiously into her face.

"What had to come?"

But she returned his gaze with shrewd, keen eyes, and said solemnly:

"Your father has forbidden you to have anything more to do with us. Don't contradict me, don't try to deny it. As if it were of any use! I can see in your eyes what happened. Lord St. Gowan went home, angry and suspicious, and I don't wonder at it! He saw you at once, told you you must give us up. No doubt he told Agneta the same. Well, he was quite right. The only wonder is that nobody found it out before; and the pity of it is to have to let us go on so long just to make this come as such a blow."

For a minute she covered her face with her hands and sobbed again, while Auckland caressed her and uttered broken words in which anger and affection and perplexity and tenderness appeared in turn.

At last she looked up again, and smiling drearily into his face said, "Well, anyhow, it's been beautiful to know that you cared for me; and now that I have to give you up I shall have something to remember to my life's end."

"You shall not give me up!" cried Auckland passionately. "Nobody can prevent my doing as I please in the matter of my marriage."

"Oh, yes, somebody can, and that's me," said Margaret simply.

"What! You won't marry me! You'll be a good girl, and fold your hands meekly, and say you'll do as you're told, and that you won't ever speak to me again? Well, Meg, if that's what you mean, I can tell you Neta won't be so submissive. She sets you a good example, for though she pretends to be in despair and to think she will never see

Nigel again, I'll bet anything she will see him again, and that she's made up her mind to marry him in spite of everybody."

Margaret looked more frightened than pleased.

"How can she? Nigel is more mysterious than anybody. He's always going away mysteriously, and now he's gone again, and this time I can't help wondering whether he'll ever come back."

"I think Neta has more faith in him than you have, then," said the young man. "I haven't exchanged a word with her since the lecture we both got from my father after breakfast, but I'm certain from the look I saw on her face that she will tell me, when we have a chance of a talk, that she means to stand by Nigel, and that she doesn't believe a word against him."

"Did your father say why you were to give us up? I suppose he assigned some reason."

"At first he didn't want to, and I don't wonder. For his reasons, when he did give them, were poor enough."

"What were they?"

"He said he didn't believe your name was your own."

"Well, I don't either."

"And that we couldn't marry into a family where one member died mad."

"And that's a very good reason, too," said Margaret. "Listen, Auckland; it's your father who is right, and not you; and the only thing that surprises me is that Lord and Lady St. Gowan didn't put their foot down long ago: for the atmosphere of mystery and secrecy which exists here is stupefying, stifling, and I can scarcely bear it myself. No man in his senses would marry into such a family, especially now that matters are complicated by my uncle's turning up, and by his avoidance of your father."

"Avoidance!"

"Yes; he avoided Lord St. Gowan this morning; I'm sure of it. It may have been by my mother's wish, but he did. It makes me mad, Auckland, for I wanted to like him, I wanted to trust him. I thought he was going to clear up the mysteries and to put things right, and instead of that he has made everything worse."

"Well, never mind him or anything. Let us get married quietly —"

She drew back quickly.

"No, no! I'll never do such a thing as that. How could I ever hold up my head again if I were to betray all the kindness your people have shown me by helping their son to disobey them? No, no, no! I tell you there's no hope for us, none at all. There's nothing left but for us to say good-bye to each other, once for all. And, Auckland, listen, I mean what I say. I hadn't the heart to let you be sent away without saying good-bye to you. But this is good-bye, really good-bye. I'll never speak to you again unless Lord and Lady St. Gowan themselves ask me to."

Auckland stared at her disconsolately.

"That means," said he, "that you'll never speak to me again at all."

"Ah! I thought so. Well, it can't be helped. I must do it. It's better to do what I feel is right, and in the face of what has happened they could not do anything but what they have done. Auckland, give me one kiss, just one, the last."

Her face was pale and distorted, and her eyes were pitifully sad and dim. It was in vain that Auckland poured out his protestations of love, swore that he would never give her up, kissed her again and again. She shed tears, but she never wavered in her resolution; and at last, tearing herself away from him, she escaped through the yew path

into the house by the garden-door, leaving him to retrace his steps, slowly and sorrowfully, to Sidford Castle.

He found his sister waiting for him in the park, near the entrance lodge. He could see, by the expression on her face, that he had not under-stated the case as regarded her: there was a mutinous expression in her light eyes, in the curves of her mouth, an air of reckless defiance in her manner, which told him that, however much he might feel the decree pronounced by their parents against the family at Rock Hall, she felt it at least as keenly, and moreover that she did not intend to take the command submissively.

The first words she uttered gave the key to her intentions.

"Auckland," she said in a determined tone, "we must hunt out Nigel!"

He stared at her helplessly.

"How on earth can we?" he said.

"We've got one clue," said she stoutly. "Do you remember how papa pricked up his ears last night when mamma told him about the pergola in Warwickshire?"

"What has that to do with it?"

"I don't exactly know; but it has something to do with it, I'm sure. Anyhow, it's in Warwickshire I mean to look for him."

Auckland frowned in perplexity.

"Do you mean to tramp the county with a map and a guide, asking everybody you meet if they've seen Nigel Blair?" he asked mockingly.

"Of course not," said Agneta contemptuously; "but I mean to find him, all the same."

"And pray what will you do with him when you have found him?"

"Then I'll get him to tell us what all this mystery means."

"And supposing he won't, or can't, what then?"

"Oh, but he will. Don't be

afraid. I've an idea that we shall be at the bottom of the mystery ourselves when we find him out. Think of it! The odd part of the Blair story has been Nigel's strange disappearances, hasn't it? When we once know where he's been hiding we shall probably find out at the same time what he's been doing, and then it will be comparatively easy to find out why he's been doing it."

The reasoning seemed wild to Auckland, but he was in the mood for adventure to distract his own gloomy thoughts, so he said presently:

"And pray how do you propose to start on this wild-goose chase?"

"I'll tell you. The first thing mamma will suggest, as a means of making us forget the Blairs, will be a change; now, won't it?"

"I daresay it will."

"Well, when she says that we must go away, we'll go."

"She won't send us off together."

"No, I'll tell you what she'll do: she'll suggest your going to London, and you'll take the suggestion like a lamb."

"And you?"

"I shall be sent off to our cousins at Scarborough, just as I was after the measles, and when the electric light was put in."

"Well!"

"I can get round both of the old dears; and when they hear we have love troubles they'll weep over us by the hour. Cousin Alberta will be sympathetic because she had a love affair once, and Cousin Edwina because she—hadn't, but would have liked to!"

"Well, Scarborough isn't Warwickshire."

"Don't be stupid! I'll get their permission to go away with you, and you will meet me, and we'll go to Warwickshire together and find out this place which is famous for its pergola."

"There may be fifty such places."

"No, there mayn't. Nigel spoke

as if this one was something quite out of the common."

"And when you've found your pergola, what then?"

"Then my belief is that we shall be on the high road to finding Nigel; for the owner of the pergola will prove to be a friend or acquaintance of his, from whom we shall hear all about him and get at him."

Auckland sat down on the grass, stupefied by his sister's amazing luxuriance of imagination.

"Well, of all the crack-brained notions!" he began slowly.

But she was imperious, persistent, overwhelmingly determined and sure of her plans.

"I see it looks crack-brained, as you call it," she admitted. "But it isn't so foolish as it looks. Something like an inspiration came into my mind last night when papa caught, as he did, at the mention of Warwickshire by Nigel. I don't myself know a bit why he was so much struck by it, but I know it must mean something, and so we'll find out."

They discussed the matter fully, and in the end, more because she was so persistent and he was anxious to be doing something, the sister prevailed upon her brother, and they deliberately waited for the suggestions of a change which they foresaw would come and which would enable them to carry out Agneta's wild plan.

It fell out just as they expected. Perhaps Lord and Lady St. Gowan were a trifle surprised at the meek submission with which both son and daughter consented to go away, the one to London, the other to Scarborough. But no suspicions appeared to exist in the innocent elderly minds, and in due time Agneta found herself in the pretty house on the south cliff at Scarborough, being petted by the two old ladies upon whose sentimental sympathy she knew she could rely so absolutely.

The Honourable Alberta St. Gowan was tall and thin and fragile-looking, and wore an air of faded sentiment about her in memory of the young naval officer who had been drowned, and to whom she was supposed to have been secretly engaged, although satisfactory evidence of this fact had never been forthcoming.

The Honourable Edwina, her sister, was short and plump, and imbued with a strong sense of sympathy and respect for Alberta as the heroine of a romance which had never fallen to her own lot. They made much of their young cousin, listened with delight and with many little sympathetic ejaculations, like the bleatings of two gentle lambs, to her artfully-told tale of woe; and finally, when she told them that she and Auckland wished to go into the Midlands together to find certain proof they could get there as to the status of the family of the man and the girl they loved, she was able without very much difficulty to persuade the old ladies to let her go with her brother, on condition that she did not stay away more than a few days.

Agneta did not wait to write to Auckland when she had gained her point; she went straight to the telegraph office and despatched a message to the effect that she would meet him at Birmingham on the following day.

Within twenty-four hours, therefore, having left the old ladies in a great flutter of excitement over their own indiscretion in allowing her to go, Agneta met Auckland at Birmingham. There they consulted local guide-books and made exhaustive inquiries, with the result that they learned of the existence of certain famous gardens at a mansion called Hare Place, close to a village named Lansborne.

That very day they started for Lansborne, and before nightfall they found themselves settled in a

cottage in the village, with a deaf old landlady, from whose gossip they expected to learn some of the information of which they were in search.

Mrs. Biggin had "heard tell" of no such thing as a pergola, but she knew there was a famous walk under arches of rose-trees "up to Mr. Kearsney's at the great house," and she was pleased to find that that was the very thing of which her young lodgers were in search.

Agneta was in high spirits at what she looked upon as an important discovery, but Auckland was miserable and ashamed of the expedition, which, he was sure, would yield nothing of any account in the way of information.

There might be a thousand pergolas in Warwickshire, and even if this one at Hare Place should prove to be the very one of which Nigel had spoken, how would they be any nearer to any knowledge of his present whereabouts if they were even to ascertain that fact?

But Agneta would not be convinced, and she asked Mrs. Biggin more questions, chiefly as to the people living in the neighbourhood, and in particular as to whether it would be possible to see Mr. Kearsney, the master of Hare Place, and to ask him some questions about rose culture, in which she represented herself and her brother as deeply interested.

Mrs. Biggin shook her head.

Mr. Kearsney was not the sort of person who could be easily seen, she said. He lived very much alone, "shut-up like," was her expression, he was not young, and he saw no visitors to speak of.

From being interested in Mr. Kearsney for what he was supposed to know about Nigel, Agneta grew interested in the man himself. Nigel had been over the grounds and through the pergola, presumably, therefore he must have found Mr. Kearsney accessible.

She grew more and more anxious to see him, as well as to hear what he might have to say.

"Couldn't one write a note and ask permission to go over his grounds?" asked Agneta, bawling into the good woman's ear.

But Mrs. Biggin shook her head vehemently.

"I shouldn't advise it," she said mysteriously. "If you must know, there's stories told about the place, and about Mr. Kearsney himself, and things as he did when he was young. And people don't visit him, nor he don't them, miss."

"We must see Mr. Kearsney," said Agneta to her brother, when the landlady had left the room.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE "REINDEER"

AUCKLAND, who had already begun to show many signs of regretting the expedition he had been persuaded to undertake, was annoyed by his sister's persistence.

He turned upon her with evident annoyance when the old landlady had left the room.

"Of course we can't force ourselves upon this gentleman against his will," he said impatiently. "You've let your fancies over this business carry you away, Neta, and I wish I'd never let you drag me here."

They were sitting in the tiny sitting-room which Mrs. Biggin called her parlour, close to the latticed window, which was open. The sweet peas in the little garden outside straggled through the window filling the room with fragrance, and the light of the setting sun shone on the rest of the old-fashioned flowers, lighting up the

peaceful, picturesque village street, which seemed to be pervaded by a spirit of calm wholly at variance with the restlessness which marked the two young people at the cottage window.

The room in which they sat was full of charm to them, contrasting as it did so strongly with the spacious apartments, wide staircases, and lofty corridors to which they were accustomed. To sit curled up on a hard horse-hair sofa, on a cushion stuffed with flock and covered with printed cotton, was an experience so novel to the viscount's daughter that it seemed to her an undreamt-of luxury. The framed coloured supplements to the Christmas numbers which hung on the walls seemed to her more interesting than Vandykes; while the china dogs on the mantelpiece, the huge, spiky shells which stood one on each side of the copy of "The Pilgrim's Progress" over the cupboard by the fireplace, were quaint, delightful, and "too sweet for anything" in her eyes.

Her brother, naturally, was not so easily pleased. He had been coaxed into this ridiculous journey away from his clubs and his polo, and he saw no charm in the cottage life of which his sister was enamoured.

Sitting back in an uncomfortable Windsor armchair, with his hands in his pockets, and with barely enough room to stretch out his legs, he frowned sullenly at the cat on the hassock in the corner, feeling that he had been made a fool of.

But there was something in the merry ring of Agneta's laughter and in the pretty pertness with which she turned her head to look scornfully at her brother, which defeated even his ill-humour. Agneta, at her best, was like a ray of sunshine, and excitement and the triumph of a supposed discovery showed her at her best now.

"We shall see him," she said deliberately, in a soft low voice, but with great decision of manner; "and we shall do so without any attempt at forcing ourselves upon him. Leave me to manage it, and I will pull it off beautifully."

Auckland drew his feet in impatiently and sat upright.

"And what's the use of it when you've done it?" he asked impatiently.

Agneta's manner was delightfully lofty and contemptuous as she condescended to explain to this degraded masculine intelligence the thoughts that flitted rapidly through her own lively mind.

"Can't you really see, Auckland, that there must be some connexion between the mystery we find here and the mystery at Rock Hall?"

Auckland looked very uncomfortable at this question.

"What?" he stammered uneasily.

Agneta bent forward and lowered her voice:

"I feel quite sure of it myself," she said. "We've left behind us a most mysterious household; of course, we've been used to them and to their ways so long that we've forgotten the fact, but it's still as true as ever that there is a mystery about the Blairs. We knew nothing whatever about them until a few days ago, when this uncle dropped down from the clouds. And now what is it that we've learnt? Nigel says in his letter to me that they've had a blow which means ruin to them all, that they've been bearing a name that is not their own, and that now they must bear it until the end of their lives. And the cause of it all seems to be a little quiet man whom you describe as courteous and amiable and charming, but whom my father speaks of as the greatest scoundrel upon earth!"

Auckland frowned.

"Come, come, Neta, you're tak-

ing too much for granted. How do we know that the man I saw—the uncle, Sir Robert Kerslake—is the man my father spoke about? Didn't my father himself say that that man was dead?"

Agneta gave a wise nod.

"Yes; I don't believe he is though. The coincidence would be too wonderful. If this Sir Robert is really the amiable creature you thought him, why should his coming drive Nigel away? At any rate," she went on, when she had waited in vain for an answer to her question, "you'll admit there is a mystery at Rock Hall?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so."

"Very well, then. You'll admit, after what the old lady said just now, that there appears to be something mysterious about Mr. Kearsney, of Hare Place, also?"

"Oh no, I don't. Surely you're not going to believe all the gossip you hear in a village? I never heard such folly." And Auckland rose impatiently and went to the window.

A horseman was passing up the wide village street as Auckland leaned on the window-sill and looked out. He was a long way off, a darkly-dressed man on a dark-hued horse, and he was coming along the road at a walking pace with a couple of dogs behind him. Agneta, who was behind her brother, saw by a movement he made that he must have seen something which startled him. He projected himself suddenly forward as far as he could, craning his neck and leaning out until she thought he would lose his balance and fall head-first out of the window among the cottage flowers.

"What is it? What's the matter?" asked Agneta.

And coming to her brother's side she tried to look out also; but the casement was narrow, and only one-half of the window,

which opened outwards, was available.

"What is it?" she repeated sharply, as Auckland drew himself into the room again and stood silent, with a dazed, perplexed look on his face.

Agneta took advantage of his having left the window to thrust her own head and shoulders out, in the endeavour to ascertain what it was that had affected her brother so strangely.

She saw nothing whatever of special interest. The road was almost deserted. A couple of small boys were playing with a ball; an old woman was knitting in the middle of one of the wide side-paths shaded with small trees, which formed such a picturesque feature of the village street. A few idlers, much further away, lounged along, too little seen to be distinguishable from where Agneta stood.

There was a turn in the road about fifty yards away from Mrs. Biggin's cottage, and Agneta saw two dogs, the one a retriever and the other a Newfoundland, disappearing at the bend.

She drew her head in again and turned to her brother.

"Why don't you tell me what it was you saw?" she said impetuously. "I can see nothing interesting at all."

Auckland looked at her with an expression of more respect than had appeared on his face since they started on their wild expedition.

"I begin to think," said he, with a grave nod, "that, strange as it seems, you have hit the right nail on the head after all, Neta."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you hear a horse's hoofs in the road just now?"

"I didn't notice them."

"Well, I saw a man on a horse come up the street and turn the corner. There were two dogs behind him."

"Yes, yes, I saw the dogs."

"Well, I may be mistaken; perhaps I've been affected by all your fancies of what you were going to find when you got here. But the man on the horse looked to me, not by his face, which I couldn't see, but by his figure, to be like—Nigel Blair!"

Agneta did not utter a word, but sank trembling down on the sofa.

Auckland went on:

"I say I may be mistaken, but it would be odd if we really have come into the neighbourhood where Nigel hides himself, wouldn't it?"

"I thought we should," said Agneta.

Now that her brother's discovery had made it probable that her fancies were justified, the girl looked more alarmed than pleased. She began to realize what a strange journey this was that she and Auckland had undertaken, and to feel nervous as to the further discoveries they might make.

Auckland saw that she was distressed, and suggested that they should give up their quest, and that he should take her back to their cousins in Scarborough on the following morning.

"For if," he said, "there really is a mystery about the Blairs, and if Nigel does hide somewhere in this neighbourhood, I think it would be exceedingly awkward for us to meet him, don't you?"

Agneta had never carried her plans quite so far as this. She had been beset with the idea that they must clear the ground for their own happiness by discovering the secret of the Blairs; but until that moment it had scarcely occurred to her to ask herself whether there might not be more danger than satisfaction in any discovery they might be able to make. Believing, as she did, that Nigel was an entirely sympathetic person, a sacrifice to the iniquities or the secrets of some one else, she had

not asked herself until this moment whether he would not be annoyed and confounded, rather than pleased and gratified, by finding how far her curiosity and her belief in him had carried her.

As these ideas forced themselves upon her, she began to cry.

Her brother did his best to console her, again pressed his suggestion that they should give up their eccentric quest, and represented to her that Nigel might resent their hunting him out, and that, if they should meet him, he would probably be exceedingly annoyed, or at least embarrassed by the encounter.

Agneta was wavering, but her curiosity had been stimulated, and, although she felt inclined to modify her plans, she told her brother that she could not now leave the neighbourhood until she had found out something more.

"Of course, you know we're playing the spy," urged Auckland. "Remember, if he'd wanted you to know this secret about himself, whatever it may be, he would have told it you."

But Agneta was obstinate on one point: she would not go away until they had tried to find out something more; she no longer insisted that she would try to meet Nigel, but only that her brother should find out, if possible, in what capacity and under what name Nigel was passing.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said her brother. "The village pub is always the place for gossip. I'll go to the 'Reindeer' myself to-night and try to get into conversation with some of the village worthies, and find out what I can. I suppose you won't bother your head any more about Hare Place and the pergola now?"

Agneta shook her head.

"Oh, no! it's only about Nigel that I want to hear."

It was arranged that Agneta,

who was much fatigued with her journeyings, should retire to rest at once, while Auckland sought the society of the village gossips at the "Reindeer."

So the young man sauntered up the street, quite as curious as his sister as to the meaning of Nigel's presence in the neighbourhood, if he really should prove to be there—a fact which he had begun to doubt.

The light in the street had not been very good when the horseman came along, and Auckland thought that he himself, with his mind occupied by the Blairs, might have been too ready to imagine a resemblance to Nigel in the dark figure of the horseman.

The "Reindeer" was a picturesque old inn, large enough to accommodate an overflow of visitors' servants from the great house of the neighbourhood, Hare Place.

The landlord, a short, stout, florid man of middle age, proved to be of a conversational turn, and was easily drawn upon the subject of the great house.

Yes, the visitor was right in supposing that the gardens of Hare Place were celebrated. The head man there was famous in his way, and had been very successful with experiments. He had a free hand, the landlord said, and was supposed to make a good thing, not only for himself, but for his master, by the success of some of his novelties in horticulture. Auckland, who had started the subject of Hare Place merely as an opening, before asking information as to the residents in the neighbourhood generally, found himself interested by the glowing descriptions of the landlord.

"If you're staying in this neighbourhood, sir, you mustn't on no account miss seeing the grounds. I don't rightly know whether Mr. Kearsney's at home just now, but if he's not, you can see them

any day, and if he is you can generally see them by writing to Mr. Jelf, the steward."

"Thanks for the tip. I should like to see them very much," said Auckland. "I suppose," he went on, "you know all the residents about here, high and low, don't you?"

The landlord replied with a smile.

"Pretty well all of them, I think, sir. They mostly call here once in a way, or if they don't, they rides and drives past often enough for me to know them by sight."

"Who was that gentleman I saw riding through the village about half an hour ago, with a couple of dogs at his heels?" asked Auckland.

The landlord shook his head.

"I haven't seen any one ride through to-night, sir," he said. "There's two or three does come with dogs, though. It might be Colonel Browning; or it might be Mr. Jelf, the steward from Hare Place—he brings the dogs out with him on his rides; a retriever, the one is, and the other a Newfoundland."

Auckland could scarcely conceal his excitement at the news. Mr. Jelf, the steward of Hare Place, might be, he was almost inclined to think must be—no other than Nigel Blair! The discovery was so important, so startling, that for a few moments he was scarcely master of himself, and he suddenly found the landlord staring at him in a very peculiar fashion.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mr. Morrison, the landlord, as he leaned forward over the bar and lowered his voice; "but did you happen to have any particular business at Hare Place?"

His tone was so suspicious, his gaze so scrutinizing, that Auckland was sure of two things—in the first place, that he himself had betrayed more emotion than he had meant to do, and in the second place that there was something specially in-

teresting about Hare Place and its occupants.

"Oh, no, I'm only a tourist," said Auckland lightly.

But he saw that he had lost his opportunity of learning anything more from the landlord, who gave him cautious answers to his further questions. So the young man decided to try his luck among the gossips in the bar-parlour.

When Auckland entered the big, square room, with its sanded floor and wooden settles, he found himself surrounded by the smoke of long churchwarden pipes, through which there gleamed at him the eyes of about a dozen of the village worthies. He soon made himself at home among his new companions, and led the conversation to the subject of the big house. The grounds, it appeared, were the pride not only of the owner but of the entire village, and it was easy to draw out one of the old gossips on the subject of the wonderful gardener, and of Mr. Jelf, the steward.

From confidential, the old gentleman with the churchwarden presently grew mysterious.

"Pity, too, sir, for that house and them grounds to be so lonely like as they've been this long time!" he remarked in a tone and with a look which were meant to lead on to further questioning.

"Yes, indeed," said Auckland, with a wise nod.

"Ay, I mind the time when it was as gay a place as any in the county, and some of us folks have felt the pinch since i's been so quiet," said the old man.

Auckland thought that another wise nod, without further words, would be the best incentive to his informant to chatter on. He was right.

"I dare say you know as much about it as I can tell you, sir?" went on the old man, with a questioning look.

"Well, I admit I have heard something, but I don't suppose I know as much as you do," said Auckland.

"I suppose as how you've heard all about him as the place belongs to, and how it comes to be always kept shut up?"

Auckland raised his eyebrows solemnly. He must feign a little more knowledge than he had, he felt.

"Is there anything in the story?" he asked, under his breath.

"Oh, ay, the story's true enough. We don't say much about it down in these parts—it ain't in nature as we should, seein' what the big house, and the grounds a-keepin' up, means to some of us. Most of our sons they get work, sometime or other, up at the big house, and more of 'em used for to get it in the old days, when there was huntin' and shootin' as well as gardening. There's shooting now, but it's let to foreigners, what brings their own men with them."

Auckland saw, with despair, that the old man was rambling away from the only point which had any interest for him. He brought him back with a sympathetic look.

"Of course, of course. Very hard. It would all have been so different but for what happened."

And he nodded significantly. The old man fell at once into the trap.

"Oh, ay, sir, it would have been right enough but for that!" he said. "It's thrown like you might call a shadow over the old place, it has, the master of it bein' a murderer."

Auckland felt as if he had been gripped by the throat. Here was a mystery indeed, such as he had not expected to hear about when he first started his inquiries. The master of Hare Place was a murderer, and Mr. Jelf, otherwise Nigel Blair, was the steward of this

villain. Auckland's brain reeled under the ideas that pressed in upon him.

What connexion was there between Rock Hall and Hare Place, that Nigel should be found occupying such a position in the murderer's employ? Why was there a mystery about it? Why was the young man Nigel Blair at Rock Hall, and Mr. Jelf at Hare Place? To be a murderer is a discreditable thing, but by no stretch of imagination could it be held discreditable to enter the employment of a man who, whatever stories there might be about his past life, appeared not only to have escaped conviction, but to be living tranquilly, if secluded, in his own home?

Auckland, when he had recovered a little from the shock of the old man's words, would have asked a few more questions; but the landlord came into the room at that point, and, perhaps fearing that there had been some indiscreet communications about the great man of the place made to the stranger, sat down by the old man with the long pipe, and effectually prevented any further gossip.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOME OF A MURDERER

WHEN Auckland got back to the cottage he knocked at the door of his sister's room, determined to wake her, if necessary, to hear his amazing news.

But Agneta was not asleep; she at once opened the door, in her dressing-gown, eager to learn anything that he might have gleaned concerning the object of their expedition.

When she heard his account of his stay at the inn, of Mr. Jelf, the steward, and his dogs, and of the story told concerning the master

of Hare Place, Agneta, as much puzzled as her brother, became even more excited than he to learn more about the mysterious connexion between the Blairs and Hare Place.

"We mustn't let it be known that it is we who want to see over the place," said she. "You must call at the lodge to-morrow, but be sure not to give our own names."

This was arranged, and on the following morning, soon after breakfast, the two young people set out on foot for Hare Place, which was not a mile away.

There was nothing distinctive about the approach to the famous grounds. There was a lodge at the gates, and the woman in charge, when they had given their name as Brown, and asked permission to see the grounds, telephoned the message to Mr. Jelf at the house.

Trembling with excitement, the young people waited for the reply.

It came without delay. They could not be admitted that morning, as Mr. Kearsney was at home; but if they would call in the afternoon they would be shown over the gardens.

They went away in a state of the keenest anticipation.

Would they see Mr. Jelf? What would he say when he saw that they had run him to earth? Would he explain the mystery of his connexion with Hare Place? Or would he resent their coming as an unwarrantable intrusion, and allow them to go away no wiser than they had come?

These and similar questions the brother and sister asked each other during the whole of the interval between their leaving the lodge that morning and arriving there again that afternoon.

On approaching the gates they perceived a tall, thin, grave-faced man, in a dark-grey suit, waiting outside in the road. He had light eyes, sandy hair and whiskers,

and he looked like a person of authority. Agneta made the suggestion that he might be the great head-gardener himself, and hoped that he would not show them round the place, since in that case they would perhaps not see the person they wished to meet—Jelf, *alias* Nigel Blair.

When they came up to him, the grave man saluted them, and said: "Mr. and Miss Brown, I think?"

"Yes," said Auckland.

"I shall have the pleasure of taking you round the grounds," said the grave man. "My name is Jelf. I am Mr. Kearsney's steward."

Auckland stammered out his thanks, but poor Agneta, unable to repress all signs of the bitter disappointment she felt, turned red and then white.

Solemnly the grave man stalked up the drive with Auckland by his side and Agneta beside her brother. The girl had no eyes for the beauties of the park, no ears for the elaborate description given by the steward of the means whereby various plants, shrubs, and trees, hitherto unknown in England, had been acclimatised under the all-commanding genius of the head-gardener.

Mr. Jelf regretted the fact that that august personage was away at the time, as he felt sure they must be full of curiosity to see him.

It crossed the minds, both of Agneta and of Auckland, that the head-gardener might prove to be Nigel Blair; and that, as his frequent absences were spoken about by Mr. Jelf, it might be that those periods explained his times of residence at Rock Hall.

Fantastic as this idea was, it seemed to both to gain confirmation from the fact that the very two dogs they had seen behind the horseman on the preceding evening came gambolling about them as they went through the grounds.

As it was evident they had missed their man, Agneta, charmed in spite of herself by the amazing beauties of the gardens themselves, and of the famous Italian walk, gave herself up partly to the enjoyment of the feast of beauty before her, and partly to conjectures concerning the mysterious master of the house.

Although she was disappointed in her expectation of finding Nigel disguised as Mr. Jelf, she did not give up the idea that it was indeed Nigel whom Auckland had seen on horseback the previous evening.

The steward had spoken of the head-gardener with awe, as of a demi-god, and had spoken of his absence as a misfortune which the visitors would feel deeply. Was it not conceivable then that Nigel was really the inspiring deity of this paradise? Were his mysterious absences from Rock Hall occasioned by his presence at Hare Place in the guise of director of horticultural matters in that famous garden?

In any case, the fact remained that Nigel was in the neighbourhood; and she wondered, even while she was expressing enthusiasm over the roses and delight with the lilies and innumerable flowers, new to her, what his connexion with the mysterious master of Hare Place could be.

More than ever she felt devoured with curiosity to see Mr. Kearsney, this rec use who was known to have committed a murder, and who seemed to be looked upon by the villagers much as if he had been the very spirit of evil himself, to be spoken of with bated breath, and not without a sneaking admiration.

She set about devising plans whereby she might contrive to get a glimpse of him, and at last her attention wandered so often from the flowers and the plants towards the long Tudor windows of the old stately red-brick mansion, that Mr. Jelf perceived her abstraction, and

himself asked her if she did not admire the house.

"It is most beautiful," said Agneta. "Tell me, is it true that Mr. Kearsney lives in it all by himself? It must be lonely on winter nights when the wind is high!"

The grave man smiled.

"Oh, yes, it's lonely for people who are not used to it. But Mr. Kearsney has lived here so long that he doesn't mind the loneliness, and the house is very comfortable inside. It has been brought up to date as far as convenience is concerned, and is thoroughly warmed—better, I understand, than almost any house in the country."

Agneta wondered whether she might venture a suggestion.

"I should immensely like to see the inside of it," she said. "I'm sure it must be perfectly lovely. I do love these old Elizabethan houses!"

"It's a nice place," assented Mr. Jelf.

Agneta assumed her most winning manner.

"Don't you think you might let us go over it?" she asked insinuatingly. "I suppose it is shown sometimes."

The steward shook his head.

"No, madam, it's not a show place," he said quickly.

"But you might let us see it," she persisted. "If Mr. Kearsney is at home, don't you think if I were to send in a message to beg him to let me see just the galleries and entrance hall and the big rooms, that he would give his permission?"

"I shouldn't like to convey such a message to him, madam. I'm afraid he would take it ill," said Mr. Jelf.

"Is he so very disagreeable and cross-grained, then?"

"Oh, no, I shouldn't say that. But he has a great horror of being disturbed, as you may judge from his way of life."

"But he can't be all over the house at once, when it's so large. Don't you think you might yourself take the responsibility of showing me over that part of the house which he does not occupy?"

The grave man smiled at the young lady's persistence.

Agneta was a merry-faced, charming little thing, and the grave steward had "taken to" her. He seemed to be wavering, and she pressed him again.

"I'm so small, and I can walk very quietly. If Mr. Kearsney from one end of the house should hear me walking about at the other, he'll only think it is a mouse running over the boards," she said.

The solemn man laughed.

"Well, madam," he said at last, with a half-guilty look round, "if you and the gentleman will wait about here—there is a seat beside the sun-dial—I'll see Mrs. Gregory, the housekeeper, and hear what she has to say about it."

"Oh, thank you, thank you so much! It is most sweet of you," cried Agneta, in high glee at having gained her point.

And she and Auckland seated themselves upon the rustic seat by the sundial, Auckland impatient and annoyed, and his sister in the highest spirits.

As soon as the steward had disappeared into the house and they were left together admiring the stone balustrade of the terrace, over which the creepers were trained, and the climbing geraniums hung down in rich masses of bloom, Auckland said uneasily:

"I wish, Neta, you hadn't asked that. It's an awfully awkward thing to go over a man's house against his wish, while he himself is in it!"

"Oh, he'll never hear about it," retorted Agneta lightly. "They'll take good care that he shan't."

"Well, and do you like the notion of going through a man's own house

without his knowledge or permission? I call it most repugnant to one's feelings, and especially as I know that you're hoping, in your heart of hearts, that you'll see him, just because you've heard he is a murderer."

"Oh, hush, hush!" cried Agneta, looking round her fearfully. "You mustn't talk about that here. And I assure you it's not from any morbid curiosity that I want to see him. I admit I should like to catch a glimpse of him, but it's because I know that he must be in some way connected with the Blairs, so that I do feel great interest in seeing what he's like."

"It would be most awkward for us if he did see you," said Auckland. "Remember, we are trespassers."

"Oh, the housekeeper and this nice old thing who's been showing us round the place will manage better than that," said Agneta lightly. "Hush! Here he comes. I can see by his face that it's all right."

She sprang to her feet; and, as she expected, Mr. Jelf announced that he had arranged with Mrs. Gregory that the lady and her brother should see the great hall, and the gallery where the family pictures were, and the private chapel, no longer used, where Charles the First was reported to have attended service during the Civil War.

Agneta thanked him profusely as she tripped along the gravel walk and up the wide steps to the terrace, where a grave-looking, elderly woman was bowing to them from a doorway.

"Mrs. Gregory, this is the young lady who is so anxious to see the interior of the house," said Mr. Jelf, introducing the visitors with a stately bow.

Both he and the housekeeper were experienced enough to have detected in these two apparently casual visitors persons "of quality,"

and Mrs. Gregory received them as if they had been an emperor and empress.

"I wish there was more to show you, madam," she said. "But the saloons are kept unused, and the furniture is all covered up. However, I can show you the great hall and the gallery, if you wish."

She led them by a short passage into the spacious hall, which occupied nearly the whole of the centre of the mansion, a magnificent relic of olden times, rich in oak wainscoting, painted windows, old armour, and pictures dark with age.

The whole effect was majestic and grand, if a trifle gloomy, and Agneta admired with more enthusiasm the long picture-gallery to which they ascended by a short flight of stairs.

This apartment, which was some eighty feet long, was a good deal more than a picture-gallery; it was a museum also. Furnished with rows of little specimen tables, things of beauty in themselves, and full of objects of interest, diamond-mounted snuff-boxes, old lace and jewellery, and ancient missals and manuscripts, the gallery had not the bare look common to such treasure stores. The pictures themselves were, as usual, of varied interest, and Agneta listened with attention, which was not wholly genuine, to the housekeeper's mechanical account of the names and deeds of bygone Kearsneys, until her attention was suddenly attracted and fixed by a portrait at the very end of the long room.

It was that of a lady, young and beautiful, with masses of dark hair arranged in the manner of the 'sixties. It was a full-length portrait, and although the dress was fanciful, and designedly that of the eighteenth rather than the nineteenth century, Agneta saw that the date must be about eighteen hundred and sixty or seventy, and

that it was, in fact, one of the most recent portraits in the long room.

But what struck her most in the picture was the face of the lady, in whom she noted at once such a strong resemblance to a face she knew well, that she could scarcely refrain from uttering an exclamation as she looked.

Glancing at Auckland, she saw that he, too, was struck by the likeness, as, after looking long at the picture, he turned to his sister and said in a low voice:

"Meg!"

"No," answered Agneta quickly, in the same tone; "her mother, when she was young."

Their rapidly exchanged comments had not escaped the ears of the housekeeper, who at once looked uneasy, and began to hurry them through the rest of the exhibition.

At the end of the room there was a blank space on the wall, from which it was evident that a picture had been taken down. Agneta would have asked a question about the portrait of the lady, but Mrs. Gregory, instead of following the young lady round the end of the room, opened the door directly in front of her, and, standing in the doorway, said quickly:

"And that is all there is to see, madam."

Agneta would have insisted on putting her question, but Auckland, who was growing more and more nervous, hurried her out with it unasked.

They found themselves then at the head of another staircase, just as a footstep sounded in the hall below. Agneta pressed forward to look down.

"Mr. Kearsney!" whispered the housekeeper, drawing the girl back.

But Agneta clung to the banister-rail, fascinated, transfixed.

"It's Nigel!" she whispered to Auckland, as he came forward in response to her look of wild amazement.

CHAPTER XIV

FACE TO FACE

THERE was a moment of dire suspense for Agneta and Auckland, who, looking over the banister-rail beside his sister, saw indeed, as she had said, that the man below, grave, erect, with hair slightly touched with grey, was no other than Nigel Blair. There could be no doubt whatever of this fact: for, hearing the slight commotion above him, the faint hissing of Agneta's whisper, the noise made by Auckland as he came forward, Nigel glanced upward, caught sight, dimly, of the group above, and quickly disappeared into the dark recesses of the small inner hall he was traversing.

Mrs. Gregory saw at once that something was amiss, something more than the unfortunate incident of the discovery by her master of the fact that she had admitted strangers into the house without his permission.

The poor woman was quite pale and agitated as she looked reproachfully at Agneta, and shaking her head, said in a low voice:

"Oh, madam, you shouldn't have shown yourself. Mr. Kearsney is very particular, and I shall get into trouble over this."

There was no doubt that the young lady was deeply agitated also, and it was easy to guess that she was not the stranger to Mr. Kearsney she had represented herself to be. Auckland also looked as if he knew more about the master of Hare Place than he had pretended; and Mrs. Gregory, as she looked from one to the other, saw that she had been grossly deceived.

Gravely she beckoned them to follow her back into the picture-gallery, and, having closed the door, lectured them solemnly upon their conduct.

"I'm surprised," she began,

"that a lady and gentleman of your position should have deceived me as you have done. If you are friends of Mr. Kearsney's you should have applied to him for permission to go over the house. It may lose me the position I've had for many years, to have admitted into the house a lady and gentleman whom Mr. Kearsney did not wish to receive."

Agneta, blushing and rather ashamed of herself, tried to laugh herself out of the difficulty, although there was little merriment in her heart or in her eyes.

"Don't take it so tragically, Mrs. Gregory," she said. "What makes you think Mr. Kearsney would not have received us?"

But the housekeeper still kept her eyes fixed first upon one of the young people and then on the other, as she retorted:

"I'm sure you can't deny that you had some special motive for wishing to get into the house, and I can't help thinking—begging pardon if I'm mistaken—that you've passed yourselves off under a name which is not your own."

Auckland shrugged his shoulders.

It was a strange accusation, he thought, to bring against them in the very house of Nigel Blair, who was passing under two different names himself.

"What makes you think Brown isn't our name?" lisped Agneta sweetly.

The housekeeper gave her a shrewd look.

"Well, madam, I've seen many sorts of people in the years I've been housekeeper here, high sorts and low sorts and middling sorts, but it's only among the highest that I've met with gentlemen and ladies like you and this gentleman and—always asking your pardon if I'm wrong—I think you must be county people who have come to see Mr. Kearsney in this quiet way because he won't meet people

belonging to the county in the ordinary way."

It was very shrewd to have come so near to finding them out, and Agneta answered gently:

"Well, your guess is not a bad one, Mrs. Gregory. But if we're what you call county people, we don't belong to this county; and we didn't come to play the spy, but to find out a very dear friend of ours who has been hiding away from us, but who wouldn't do so, I think, if he understood how much pain it gives us not to know where he is."

The girl, who was evidently still much agitated, spoke so simply yet with so much feeling, and allowed so much of the sentiments in her heart to be expressed in her face and tone, that Mrs. Gregory became not only softened but interested. At the same time, however, she knew that she herself had been guilty of an indiscretion in admitting the visitors, whatever their motive might have been, and although she was sympathetic to the girl, she was conscious of her own error of judgment and exceedingly anxious to get the intruders safely off the premises.

But while she had been conversing with Agneta, Auckland had returned to the big full-length picture of the lady with the dark hair, and he now abruptly put another question about the original of the portrait.

"You didn't tell us the name of this lady," he said fixing a searching gaze upon the housekeeper.

But Mrs. Gregory drew herself up.

"Indeed, sir, I'm sorry I told you anything about the pictures at all," she said stiffly.

Auckland was about to say something in an angry tone, but Agneta rushed into the breach, tucked her hand beneath her brother's arm and whispered to him soothing words.

"We'd better go as quickly as we can," she then added aloud;

"and we sincerely hope, Mrs. Gregory, that you won't have offended Mr. Kearsney by your kindness to us. I don't really think you will. I may tell you, although he did not expect us, nor did we expect to see him, that we are old friends of his, very old friends."

The information seemed to be disquieting rather than consolatory to the housekeeper; but Agneta, with more words of thanks and apology, was gradually getting her brother nearer and nearer to the door, by which they then went out very quickly.

She contrived to keep Auckland silent till they were once more on the terrace, when he burst out:

"Well, I hope you're satisfied with your discoveries now!"

The girl said nothing but "Hush!" till they had gone down the steps, had met Mr. Jelf again at the bottom, and had assured him of the pleasure the visit had given them.

The young people both fancied that the steward suspected something to have gone wrong; but he asked them no questions, and let them go out into the park, where he took leave of them in a manner which Agneta described as "respectfully fatherly."

When they were once more in the road outside, on their way back to the village, Auckland's indignation broke out.

"Now I hope you're satisfied," he cried passionately. "We've found out a good deal more than we bargained for; we've made more than fools of ourselves, and the best thing we can do is to get away as fast as we can, before Nigel can be sure that the two people who forced themselves into his house without his knowledge or permission were you and I."

Agneta stared coldly and superciliously at her brother.

"Do you really think," she said,

"that I'm going back without having seen him, or at least heard from him? Of course not. I believe he saw us; I think he must have recognized us. For he was down in the dark part of the hall, and we could recognize him, while there was more light up above, where we were, and I saw him look up."

Auckland frowned impatiently.

"Well, supposing he did see us, and recognize us, since we know he wanted to get away from the people who knew him, he will be only the more determined not to have anything to say to us."

"I don't agree with you. It was all very well to give us up. But it's not in human nature not to be pleased to find that one's friends won't be given up. When he finds that you cared enough about him to hunt him out, to follow him up——"

"But I didn't. It was all your doing. He might have gone to Jericho, for what I cared."

"Really? And Meg, too?"

His face changed.

"Meg! Oh, no! And I don't mean to give her up, whatever happens. I was glad to get away, to be able to give things a chance of settling down, but I'm just as determined as ever to marry her, and I shall do it. It's only a question of waiting."

"Well, and it's only a question of waiting between me and Nigel."

Her brother stared at her in amazement.

"After his letter to you! And what we've found out here!"

"His letter showed me more plainly than anything I've ever heard from him before that he does care for me. He was heartbroken at the thought of not seeing me again."

"Then why didn't he welcome us when he recognized us just now?"

Agneta could not answer, and presently her brother saw that the

tears were in her eyes. He tucked his hand under her arm, and spoke caressingly in her ear :

"Look here, Neta, you had better forget him. You had better let me take you away. Remember, you and I don't stand in the same position. There's nothing against poor Meg, my beautiful, sweet Meg, except the fact that her family has been—shall we say, unfortunate? But there's more than that against Nigel. I'm sure I pity him with all my heart, and I feel convinced the murder he committed——"

"What murder?" broke in Agneta fiercely, withdrawing her hand from her brother so sharply that he stumbled. "What do you mean by murder?"

Auckland looked surprised.

"Do you want me to remind you of all that you know?" he asked, after a pause. "Of the fact that the gentle old gentleman who calls himself Sir Robert, and who says he is their uncle, no sooner appears on the scene than Nigel is obliged to get away? Taken together with what I heard at the 'Reindeer' last night, how can you doubt the fact that Nigel at some time or other got himself into trouble so grievous that he has not only had to bury himself ever since, but to make his whole family bury themselves with him."

Agneta, however, would not be convinced.

"And pray when was this wonderful murder committed?" she asked scornfully. "When we first knew Nigel, he was scarcely more than a boy."

Auckland nodded.

"Yes. And I don't suppose he was more than a boy when he did this horrible thing that has spoilt his life. But that he did something that makes him obliged to hide himself, we must know, and his letter confirms it. And doesn't everything about him help to show that it must be true? Look at his

appearance. We know that he can't be more than thirty-two. Yet his hair is very grey, his face is full of lines, and the people about here—those who don't know all the story—speak of him as if he were an elderly man."

"Do they?"

"Yes, yes. You know they do."

Agneta seemed for a moment to be brought to bay. Then, with another flash of passion, she cried :

"Well, I don't care. Nothing will convince me that he's ever done anything wrong. I wouldn't believe he had done anything dreadful even if he were to tell me so himself. I should say he was either hiding the crime of some one else, and sacrificing himself, or else that he had done it when he was so much excited by something done by some one else that he struck a man in a passion, without any thought of doing him real harm."

Auckland shook his head.

"That wouldn't be murder, but manslaughter, and no man would be such a fool as not to stand his trial for such a thing," he said.

There was a pause—an obstinate silence on Agneta's part, a silence of uneasiness and distress on her brother's.

"You'll be reasonable, I know," he said at last, "and go away with me to Scarborough to-night."

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the sort. I don't mean to leave this place without giving Nigel an opportunity of explaining."

"When explanation is the very thing he has carefully refrained from giving!" jeered Auckland.

"I don't care!" was the mutinous retort.

Then Auckland assumed a severe and hectoring tone.

"Well," he said, "I've done my very best with you, and for you. I've humoured you, given myself up to your whims, brought you here when you ought to have been in Scar-

borough, hunted about for you, got you permission to find out what you would insist upon knowing, and in fact done what not one brother in a thousand would do for such an ungrateful, pig-headed thing as a sister. But now I've made up my mind. I won't put up with any more nonsense. And if you don't agree to go away with me to-night, without attempting to interfere with Nigel or Kearsney, or anybody else, any more, I shall just write home to my father, tell him where you are, and let him come and fetch you back. And then you know what a row there'll be ! "

Agneta did know, and she first grew pale, and then she cried. She ended by telling her brother that he was a brute and a wretch, that he didn't deserve to have a sister as devoted to him as she was, and that she should do as she liked, in spite of all the fathers and mothers that ever were made.

After which, having nearly reached the cottage where they were staying, Agneta further signified the deep displeasure under which Auckland was lying, by leaving him alone, running home as fast as she could, shutting herself up in her own room, locking the door, and sobbing conspicuously when she heard him go past, to impress him with a sense of his own unworthiness in having brought such deep distress on such a nice little sister !

Auckland thought it best to leave her to herself for a little while, thinking that when she had got over her first disappointment and distress at the discovery that she had made about Nigel she would listen to reason and see, as he saw, that the sooner they went away and the more thoroughly they buried the incidents of their wild-goose expedition, the better it would be for them all.

He himself saw clearly now where the mystery lay which had

enveloped the Blair family for so long. The portrait of the lady in the picture-gallery who so closely resembled Meg, and whom Agneta had identified as Mrs. Blair, could be, he was sure, no other than that lady herself ; and the fact of her portrait occupying the place of honour in the gallery seemed to prove conclusively that she was really a member of the Kearsney family, and that her portrait had been painted and hung up during her reign as the mistress of Hare Place.

He had very little difficulty in coming to this conclusion, for the family at Sidford Castle had from the first recognized, in the unknown and mysterious Blairs, members of their own order.

It seemed evident that it was some crime committed by Nigel which had forced the family to hide themselves under an assumed name, and that the gentle and courteous old gentleman who called himself Sir Robert was, in fact, not the relation he pretended to be, but the blackmailer whom Lord St. Gowan had recognized in him.

Of course there were many points which still required explanation. Why, for instance, had Nigel dared to come back to his old home, and to resume his old name there, while his mother and sister remained away ? Surely it would have been more natural for the ladies to have come back, and for him to have travelled abroad or gone to live in some out-of-the-way place where no one would have suspected his identity. Then again, knowing that Nigel was no coward, Auckland felt surprised that he should not, at the outset, have preferred to stand his trial like a man, to burying himself and his family far away from their own home, under circumstances which must bring a certain amount of gossip and suspicion upon them.

Auckland would have liked very

much to go straight back to Hare Place, to ask for an interview with Mr. Kearsney, and to demand from him, as man from man, an explanation of the whole mystery. Considering his own affection for Margaret, and his steady determination to marry her in spite of everybody and everything, such a request could scarcely have been taken other than in good part by Nigel.

But there was one thing which restrained the young man, and that was the knowledge that if he were to go to Hare Place, Agneta would certainly go, too. Much as he liked Nigel, and earnestly as he wished that some satisfactory way out of the difficulty might be found, so that his sister might be happy, Auckland felt that he dared not encourage a meeting between Agneta and Nigel until he knew more.

But while he was debating these things in his mind, his artful little sister was carrying out certain ideas of her own. She came down to luncheon, affected more submission to her brother's views, and then went upstairs, ostensibly to pack up her things for the return journey to Scarborough.

But as soon as the unsuspecting Auckland had gone into the field at the back of the cottage to smoke a cigarette among the sheep, Agneta put on her hat, opened her door softly, and fled downstairs and out of the house, in the direction of Hare Place.

Her instinct told her that Nigel, now that he had seen and recognized her, and knew that she was in the neighbourhood, would not rest until he had found her out. She thought, therefore, that there would be no need now for her to go more than half-way towards a meeting.

Her intuition was prophetic. There was a very pleasant path over the fields from the village to Hare Place, and by taking it she knew that she would be able to see

around her for some distance, as the ground was high and the hedges were low. When she was half-way across a meadow in which cows were grazing she caught sight of the dark figure and the dark-hued horse, with the two dogs at his heels, in a lane on her right hand. She stopped short with an exclamation, and a moment later she knew that Nigel had seen her.

Dismounting at once, he tied his horse to a stake in the fence of the meadow, and vaulting over into the field, came straight towards her at a rapid pace, while the two dogs barked and gambolled round him.

At first Agneta, suddenly overcome with shame, confusion, and vague distress, now that the meeting she had longed for was inevitable, made a feint of continuing her walk.

But Nigel from a walk broke into a run; and a minute later he had overtaken her and was standing, with an expression of ineffable tenderness and sadness on his face, looking down on her.

"Why did you do it?" he said.

For a moment Agneta could not reply. She felt that if she dared to speak she would burst into tears. There was a pause, and then he repeated his question, bending his head a little to look more closely into her face.

By a great effort she recovered her self-possession and looked up almost defiantly.

"Why did I do what—Mr. Kearsney?"

The look of sharp pain which crossed his face made her sorry that she had used the name. She hung her head and bit her lip.

"Well," he said gently, "your curiosity is satisfied now. My name is Kearsney. But I wish to heaven you had never found it out—that you had never found *me* out."

His tone, in which tenderness struggled with grief, cut her to the heart and made her more than ever ashamed of herself. She managed

to say in a fairly steady voice, but without looking up:

"Now that I have found out, and remembering, as you must remember, that I shouldn't have tried if I hadn't cared so much, won't you be frank with me and tell me all about it?"

He shook his head.

"You had much better not know. If I were to tell you everything it would cause me deep distress, without doing me any good. There, now I've been frank, haven't I?"

His tone assumed, as he went on speaking to her, the sort of grave half-playfulness which he often used when speaking to this merry little butterfly of a girl, who had so long seemed to him the epitome of womanly charm.

She looked up, mutinous again.

"What! You have told me nothing," she exclaimed.

He grew impatient.

"What more do you want to know? Why don't you be satisfied with looking upon the past as dead and done with? Nigel Blair is dead. I almost wish that he had never lived: he can certainly never come to life again. I had wished you to be satisfied with that."

"How can I? Oh, why is all this mystery kept up now that I've learnt so much? Nigel, don't you care for me a little? Don't you? don't you?"

His dark face worked convulsively.

He made a gesture to stop her, and even tried to walk away from her. But her pitiful little cry, "Nigel! Nigel!" made him stop, waver, come back again. By that time he had recovered his self-possession, and he began to scold her in the playful way he had so often used.

"You're a naughty child, Neta, a very naughty child. You had no business to come here at all. I'm not going to ask how you found me out. Your cleverness

in doing it frightens me, but I'm not going to flatter your vanity by asking you any questions. I want you, like the nice little Neta you can be when you like, to please me in this one thing: to go away, and to keep silent upon what you have learnt. You will do that, I know, when I tell you it is important for me."

Agneta looked up quickly.

"Ah!" she said. "You are afraid of something, afraid of some one finding you out here?"

"Well, and what if I am?"

She did not answer. Instead she looked down on the ground, wondering what she could say to induce him to confide in her.

Suddenly he asked her another question, in quite a different tone:

"Your people don't know you've come here, of course?"

"No; they think I'm staying with some cousins in Scarborough."

"What did Auckland say when he found me out?"

The red blood rushed into the girl's cheeks, and Nigel laughed a little.

"Ah! I know, I think. He thought—the worst."

"No, no! But—he knew you were hiding."

"Quite true; so I am."

Agneta looked up defiantly.

"But I know that you have no need to hide, that you have done nothing to be ashamed of—nothing, nothing."

"Auckland doesn't agree with you?"

"Well, what does that matter? You must expect people to think things that are not true when you hide yourself away, and take a name that isn't your own."

"Quite true. And you persist, in the face of what you know, and in the face of the opinion of your brother, who is older and wiser than you, in thinking I have done no wrong, and that my

assumption of a false name is only an amiable eccentricity?"

Agneta's charming little face puckered up into a frown.

"I'm sure I don't know quite what to think," she said. "I only know, because I know you, that you can't have done anything disgraceful."

There swept over his face such a passion of relief and joy that instinctively Agneta stepped back, shrinking, as if confronted with something tangible, too strong to be met. But he controlled his emotion, and clenching his hands said gently:

"Neta, you're a darling; though it's the last time I can tell you so, it's a delight to be able to say it. You're the very essence of a loyal and brave woman, without any nasty, disagreeable, awkward unnecessary common sense or anything of that sort."

Agneta drew herself up, half offended yet not wholly displeased by the equivocal compliment.

"I don't like people I can't trust," she said haughtily; "and I don't like or trust by halves."

"I know you don't. I can find no fault in you—none."

"Then why don't you stand by me, as I am ready to stand by you?"

A look of sudden fear passed over his face.

"Well, since you force me to say it, I will tell you. I can't take you by the hand and ask you to stand by me because by so doing I should bring upon you the greatest grief you have ever known; I should be the cause of your going near to breaking your heart."

Her quick perception read the riddle to her.

"You mean," she said, staring into his dark face with keen eyes, "that you are in danger, and that you have to bear it alone."

He looked surprised at her quick wit.

"Ah!" she cried triumphantly, "though I may not have any common sense or anything of that sort, I have some intelligence, you see, after all."

"You have the best intelligence of all, the most feminine."

"Well, I know that you are in danger, and that you are throwing me off because you want to bear it alone."

"And supposing it were so, shouldn't I be right? It is not as if the danger could be lessened by being shared."

Agneta was still looking up at him with penetrating eyes.

"You haven't always thought this?" she said inquisitorially.

"No."

"You didn't think so before you left Rock Hall, before your uncle came there?"

The swift shadow that passed over his face betrayed him.

"I didn't always think so," said he with reserve.

"You are afraid of your uncle," said Agneta sharply.

"Never mind of whom I am afraid or not afraid. Here come a whole bevy of people from the village, people who know me and whom I know. You had better go back to your brother; and, mind, you are to go away and you are to forget. It is the only thing to be done, the only thing."

Agneta smothered a sob.

"Good-bye!" she said.

She leaned towards him, inviting him to kiss her. But he did not dare. Instead, he held her hand in his for the space of a second, raised it to his lips, pressed one passionate kiss upon her wrist, and turning quickly ran across the field toward the place where he had left his horse.

With the tears dimming her eyes, Agneta made for the shelter of the trees of the lane on her right and went quickly back to the village.

CHAPTER XV

WITH CATLIKE TREAD

It was five o'clock when Agneta reached the cottage, where she learned that her brother, on discovering that she had gone out, had gone in pursuit of her. Mrs. Biggin said that he was "in such a way," from which Agneta inferred that Auckland suspected her intention of returning to the neighbourhood of Hare Place.

In spite of the distress from which she was suffering the girl could scarcely refrain from smiling at the idea of the absurd chase in which they were engaged—she going in search of Nigel, and Auckland of her, while she herself was in two minds as to whether she should not start in pursuit of her brother.

However, Mrs. Biggin persuaded her to have a cup of tea before going out again, and then the girl decided that he must have gone further than the park, and that it would be useless for her to go out to look for him.

They had suggested dinner at half-past seven, but the idea had so shocked their simple landlady that they had hastily withdrawn the suggestion, and substituted for it the word "supper," which Mrs. Biggin understood and could cope with.

Agneta, therefore, deciding that Auckland would probably be absent until half-past seven, went out into the fields and amused herself as best she could until her brother came back.

Her heart was too heavy for her to enjoy to the full the charm of the country landscape, of the scent of the hay that came from a neighbouring field, the sunset on the soft, green grass, or the rest of the rural sights and sounds around her; but she felt somewhat soothed by them in spite of herself, and when Auckland came back, soon after seven o'clock, and leaping over the fence at the

bottom of the cottage garden met her with a face full of excitement, she had got rid of all traces of her tears.

Auckland had an adventure to relate, and he was grave as well as worried.

"Where have you been?" asked Agneta quickly; "and what has happened?"

"Well," said he, "I've had an odd sort of meeting."

And he proceeded to narrate to her the story of his walk.

He had gone, as Agneta had expected, in the direction of the park at Hare Place, and had skirted it in the expectation of meeting his sister. He had felt sure she would not be bold enough to go inside by herself, but he had thought to find her taking a walk somewhere in the outskirts.

Before he had gone far he caught sight of something moving behind a hedge on his left hand, and going towards the spot he was sure that something alive, either a quadruped or a human being in the act of bending down, had sprung away on the other side.

The hedge was thick and high, and well made, so that he could neither see through it nor get over it. Not to be daunted, however, the young man went on again with his walk along the lane, keeping a good look-out for any further movement behind the hedge.

He had in this way traversed quite a long distance with the park wall on one side of him and the hedge on the other, when he again became aware of a movement behind the thick thorn hedge.

This happened several times, Auckland, on the alert, giving no further sign of remarking the movements until he came to a gate in the field. This he vaulted over, just in time to see a small figure trying to hide itself in the dry ditch under the hedge.

Auckland ran to the spot, pulled

the figure out by the neck, and recognized, to his intense amazement, in the dusty and travel-stained little man before him, the once dapper and spruce Sir Robert, to whom he had taken so great a liking when he met him at Rock Hall.

"Why, Sir Robert, what are you doing here?" he cried in astonishment, as the old gentleman laughed good-humouredly and professed himself "caught."

"And I'm perfectly certain," said Auckland, as he related his adventure to his sister, "that the poor old gentleman is not quite right in the head, for anything more forlorn than he looked, with his clothes and his shoes covered with dust, his clothes torn and his face bleeding, I never saw in my life. And there was a look in his eyes, too, which was not that of a sane person. It was a sort of glare, so that though he spoke to me quite sensibly, told me he had been thrown out of a motor-car and that he had lost consciousness for a time, and asked me where he was, I fancy he was not much the wiser when I told him."

But Agneta listened to this recital with terror in her eyes.

"He is not mad," she said quickly. "Don't you know why he is here? He has found out where Nigel is, and he has come to blackmail him again! Oh, I am sure of it, quite sure!"

Auckland frowned.

"I did think of that," he admitted, "but in that case he certainly would not have come up to the house like a thief, ashamed of himself and all over dust and dirt. He would have arrived spruce and trim and smiling, to lay down the law to his victim, and to get what he could out of him, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Agneta slowly.

But she was not satisfied. There was a terrible fear at her heart lest she and her brother should, by some means, have given the clue to this

blackmailer as to the whereabouts of Nigel.

She had never herself seen Sir Robert, the mysterious uncle of the Blairs, but she had jumped at once to the conclusion that her father's description of him was the correct one, and she now felt sure that, however mysterious his manner of coming might be, his errand was one fraught with danger to Nigel.

She begged her brother to go to Hare Place and to see Nigel, and warn him of the presence of Sir Robert in the neighbourhood. But Auckland refused point blank, laughed at his sister's fears, told her he did not care to interfere if Nigel were a criminal, and that the blackmailer could do him no harm if he were an innocent man.

Agneta persisted in her entreaties, but to no avail. At last she affected to acquiesce in her brother's views that they had better not interfere, and seizing the opportunity of his going out to buy some cigarette-papers, she ran out of the cottage in the opposite direction and, choosing the short cut she now knew well, hastened across the fields towards Hare Place.

It was still quite light, and she had no difficulty in finding her way, and it was not until she came in sight of the lodge gates that she began to slacken her steps, rather ashamed of her errand, though still resolved to persist in it.

Nigel had done nothing wrong, yet she was afraid of his being blackmailed. It sounded rather illogical, and she could not make out a very clear case for herself, but yet she, knowing that he had admitted himself to be in danger, persisted in thinking it must be from this little dapper, courteous gentleman of whom she had heard such contradictory accounts.

She passed through the lodge gates at last, with a rather shy smile at the keeper who opened the gate for her.

Half-way up the drive she hesitated as to what she should do. Would she be refused admission, put off by some information to the effect that Mr. Kearsney was not at home?

Thinking this very probable, after her adventure with the house-keeper, Agneta turned aside, and went over the grass by a roundabout way, directing her steps towards that end of the house where the library was, in which she knew Nigel spent most of his time.. She was successful in avoiding observation, the hour being late, and the gardeners having finished their work.

The great library window was open, and she was able to peep in through the ivy, and to see Nigel bending over his desk with his head in his hands.

But it was not his figure which riveted her attention; it was that of a small, slight man with scanty grey hair, in dusty clothes and without a hat, who was advancing upon Nigel from behind. There was something so catlike in the man's tread, so crafty in his bearing, that Agneta knew at once that he had come on some desperate and evil errand. She knew he must be the Sir Robert of whom she had heard so much, knew that it was from him that the peril threatened Nigel.

So strong were her feelings of terror and consternation that for a moment her throat seemed too dry for her to utter a sound. Then, as the man advanced stealthily nearer and nearer to the back of Nigel's chair, she suddenly perceived that his right hand appeared to be holding something.

Summoning her strength, she uttered a faint cry, and Nigel, starting up, turned sharply and found himself face to face with the cowering figure of the man in the dusty suit.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN IN GREY

It all happened so quickly that Agneta, outside the window, peeping in through the ivy, trails of which protruded from each side, could be sure of little beyond the fact that the one man had been approaching the other from behind.

Nigel's figure was in the full light of the lamp on the desk before him; and the misery and despair expressed by his attitude as he leaned upon his hands, his face hidden, had struck her at once with a sense of keenest compassion. But the figure of the second man, being in the shadow outside the lamplight, was only dimly seen by her, and it was from the knowledge that it must be the blackmailer, rather than from actual vision, that she was so sure it was he.

And then, as soon as the stifled cry escaped her lips, there came a change of a sudden and amazing sort.

Nigel, when he sprang up and turned round on hearing her cry, uttered the one word:

"You!"

For a moment there was no answer. Agneta's eyes were getting accustomed to the gloom, and besides, now that she had betrayed her presence, there was no need for her to conceal herself; so she put her head through the trails of ivy, and looked in by the open window.

Nigel had glanced towards her, but his attention having been immediately distracted to the man in the grey suit, he did not look again towards the window but stood staring at the figure before him, as if scarcely believing that he saw the intruder in the flesh.

To Agneta, wondering, excited, fascinated, yet all the while ashamed of her own position as spy, the silence which followed seemed to endure quite a long time.

It was broken at last by a light

laugh from the man in grey. Transferring her gaze from Nigel to him, and convinced that he was the man of whom she had heard so much, the man who had given his name as Sir Robert, and who had been seen and suspected by her own father, Agneta examined him closely.

This was the easier that Nigel, when he sprang to his feet and turned, had stepped out of the lamp-light, which now shone on the face and figure of the other man.

Slightly built, spare, almost wizened, the man in the grey suit, dusty and travel-stained as he was, had yet the bearing and the manners of a gentleman. Agneta was struck by a certain dignity in his deportment, as laughing lightly, he drew himself up, and said:

"Yes, it's me. Why are you so surprised? You might have expected me."

If, as Agneta had fancied, he had been holding some weapon concealed in his right hand, she could now see no trace of it. Standing in an easy and debonnair attitude, he held out his right hand to Nigel with the confidence of intimacy.

But the younger man took no notice of it. He was looking curiously at the right hand coat-pocket of his visitor.

"How did you get in?" he asked shortly.

His visitor shrugged his shoulders, put his hands in his pockets, and answered with an air of dignified rebuke:

"That is a strange question to put to me."

There was a pause, during which Nigel glanced again at the window. Then he said coldly:

"Of course I know that you are acquainted with all the ins and outs of the place. You came in by the garden door, on the west side, I suppose, when there was no one about."

If Nigel did not choose to take

any notice of the lady at the window, his visitor was fully aware that they were under observation.

"I don't know whether you have observed," he said with an air of easy intimacy, "that we are not alone. There is some person—a woman, if I mistake not—taking stock of us through that window."

"I know," said Nigel. And he added, in a tone of veiled menace: "It may prove to be very important for me to have had a witness to what has just taken place."

The pleasant voice, bearing signs of age, perhaps, but mellow and soft to the ear, again answered:

"Taken place! But nothing has taken place, as far as I know, unless you call it an incident for me to have offered you my hand, and for you to have refused it."

Nigel glanced at the window, frowning, as if doubtful how much he dared say in the presence of a third person.

The contrast between the two men was strongly marked and striking. In appearance, manners, voice, in their customary attitudes and bearing, the one was the antithesis of the other. For while Nigel was tall, very dark of complexion, grave and sedate of manner, heavy of voice and extremely sparing of gesture, his visitor, on the other hand, was fair, light of voice, easy of manner, using more gesture in conversation than is customary with an Englishman. But if their physical attributes were unlike, the moods in which they met each other were more strongly contrasted still.

Nigel had a haunted look on his face; he was evidently afraid of his visitor, suspicious, uneasy, bowed down by some deep dread.

On the other hand, the lithe little man in grey was perfectly easy in his demeanour, his voice betrayed no signs of agitation, and his whole bearing was full of an easy confidence, tempered, perhaps,



He drew back a step, and then flung himself upon Nigel."

The Disappearance of Nigel Blair

[Chapter XVI.]

with some little surprise at the manner in which he had been received.

"Come, come," said the visitor, at last breaking the long silence, and speaking with a touching air of gentle persuasion; "you are treating me very ill. I'm quite sure you must acknowledge that I had a perfect right to come here, and that it is not for you to dictate to me by what door I should enter."

"You know we're not alone," broke in Nigel quickly, in a shame-faced whisper.

The visitor laughed pleasantly.

"I have nothing to conceal," he said airily, "nothing whatever. I suggest," and he put his head on one side and took a step in the direction of the window, "that we invite the young lady—I think it is a young lady—to come inside the room, where she will be able to see us and hear us without the risk of catching cold."

Agneta, burning with shame and yet conscious, under all her self-abasement, that there was something untold, some hidden and great danger to Nigel in all this, was about to withdraw hastily, when she was checked by a fresh and startling incident.

"I thought so!"

The words were snapped out by Nigel, as, taking advantage of his visitor's move in the direction of the window, he plunged his hand into the pocket of the man in grey, and drew from it and held up to the light a small revolver. "You meant to shoot me!"

With a little cry of horror, Agneta, instead of withdrawing, now clung to the window-sill, and stared at the two men with eyes full of terror.

She saw them exchange a look, full of unspeakable terror and loathing on Nigel's part, and of malignity on the part of the man in grey.

The next moment the latter

laughed, with the same ease of manner as before.

"To shoot you! Do you mean that? Are you really so simple? Well, if you are, I suppose you're going to give me up? have the police sent for? haul me before the magistrates, eh?"

The last ejaculation he added quite jauntily, mocking the solemn seriousness of the other man.

When Nigel spoke it was in a tone of fierce despair.

"You are mad," he said shortly, "there's no doubt of that. You will have to be treated as mad, put under restraint—again."

A hoarse sound escaped the lips of the other man. It was not like any cry Agneta had ever heard before from the lips of a human being. He drew back a step, and then flung himself upon Nigel, trying to wrest the revolver from him.

Agneta uttered a cry.

"Shall I go for help?" she sobbed out in a hoarse whisper, leaning as far as she could into the room, as Nigel held off the man in grey with one hand and raised the revolver high above his head with the other.

"No, no!" he cried imperiously, in answer to the girl's question. And a moment later he had thrown the revolver into a corner, and seizing his assailant in an athletic grip, was holding his hands pinned behind him.

Not even then, however, did the composure of the man in grey desert him. Turning his head towards the window, when Nigel had forced him into a chair, he said lightly:

"Pray, madam, excuse these little eccentricities on the part of our friend. He appears to be suffering from hallucinations, and we must bear with him."

Agneta made no answer, and remained motionless outside the window, not daring to move away until she could have some assurance of Nigel's safety.

In the meantime, the cheery voice of the man in grey broke the silence again :

"And pray what do you propose to do with me? Are you going to carry out your threat, and to have me sent off to a lunatic asylum? I suppose you know that the evidence of two doctors will be necessary, and I'm afraid you'll find it difficult to get that."

Nigel had already released him, and stepped back a few paces with an air of disgust.

"I don't propose to do anything to you," he said shortly. "I should be glad, on the other hand, to know what you propose to do yourself, and why you have come here in this fashion, instead of in the ordinary way?"

At this question Agneta saw on the intruder's face the same expression of desperate malignity which she had already seen pass over it once before.

"Have you any right to dictate to me in what fashion I shall come here?" he retorted in a tone of dignified arrogance.

"Of course not; I don't dictate. I only ask why you did an astonishing thing, why you have come here surreptitiously, instead of openly. Is it because your intention was to come upon me by stealth, to attack me, to murder me?"

For once the easy-mannered visitor appeared to lose his self-possession for a moment, and to quiver at the concluding accusation.

"Need I reply to such questions?" he replied, recovering himself after a short silence. "I scarcely think it can be necessary. You know me too well."

To this Nigel replied with a slight shrug of the shoulders, and then he went to the window.

"Agneta," he said in such a low voice that his words should not reach the ears of the man in the room behind him, "how is it you are here? What made you come?"

The change which came over his dark face when he spoke to her touched the sensitive girl to the quick. It was as if a new man had peeped out from behind the hard, stern mask of righteous anger and indignation which he had shown to the man in grey.

Trembling, she whispered her answer:

"Auckland met him hiding behind a hedge, and I thought you ought to know he was about. I didn't dare to come boldly up to the house, for I wanted to see you, and I was afraid they wouldn't let me. So I came to the window, thinking to find you alone. I guessed you were here, because the window was open; and when I looked in—you know what I saw. I had just come, and I called out at once."

Nigel's hand, resting on the window-sill, had touched hers, and she felt his fingers trembling.

"You have probably saved my life," he whispered. "God bless you! Now what are you to do? Will you let me send some one back with you?"

"Oh, no, no," said Agneta quickly. "I'd rather go back by myself. It's light still, and I'm not a bit afraid. Take care of yourself, and—write to me, write to me. Let me know when you are *safe*!"

She snatched her hand away. He was reluctant to let her go, but she persisted and made her escape, running lightly across the lawn in the direction of the drive.

She was in such an agitated state that she scarcely knew what was the strongest impression she was carrying away with her from Hare Place.

Nigel was in danger; but there were other impressions, too, chasing each other through her mind. The man in grey was certainly the Sir Robert of whom she had heard so much, but whether he was really a blackmailer seemed less certain.

He was certainly no ordinary thief. The assurance with which he had borne himself, the dignity with which he had dared and defied Nigel, even after having been caught in what the other man looked upon as an attempt to murder him, proved that he was no common criminal, but that he had some hold upon the man he was attacking.

What was the nature of the bond between them? What was the nature of the quarrel?

These questions were so vividly interesting to Agneta that she found herself slackening her steps, with an instinctive reluctance to leave the neighbourhood where alone these problems could be solved.

She had dropped into a sober walk by the time she reached the drive, and when she came to a bend where a clump of evergreens stood out close to the roadway, she suddenly stopped and uttered a low cry on finding herself face to face with the man in grey.

to realize that she was talking to a dangerous man, and not to a charming and well-bred stranger. He raised his cap as he said :

"Don't be frightened. Oh, don't let me think I've frightened you. Come, I've run all this way to meet you just to ask your forgiveness for having frightened you, when all I wanted to do was to frighten that silly Nigel."

"Silly Nigel!" echoed Agneta stupidly.

"Very silly fellow indeed!" said the stranger lightly. "And I heartily wish I could say no worse of him."

"It is of no use to say worse of him to me," said Agneta drily.

The old gentleman laughed as if much pleased by her speech.

"That's right. Always stand up for your friends," he said. "If Nigel is a friend of yours, you can do more than stand up for him: you can advise him to do me justice, to fulfil his duty, and to behave as an honest man."

Agneta, who had been examining his face keenly, and who had already come to the conclusion that, with all his urbanity, his easy movements, and his pleasant voice, the stranger did not improve upon acquaintance, asked in a low voice, after a little pause :

"Who are you?"

The stranger smiled.

"I think you know," he said.

"I suppose you are the Sir Robert Kerslake who came to Rock Hall a few days ago?" she said.

He nodded genially.

"And you, I begin to think, must be the daughter of my old acquaintance, Lord St. Gowan. But it is a little surprising to find you here. When I left Rock Hall I understood that you were in Yorkshire."

All this time, in spite of his ease of manner and the simplicity of her replies, there was an evident anxiety on the part of each to discover the real mind of the other.

CHAPTER XVII

AGNETA'S ADVENTURE

THE moment she caught sight of the trim little figure, slim and dapper in spite of travel and dust, Agneta knew that he must have lain in wait for her. Slight as was his figure, he was panting from the exertion of running across the park, and it seemed to her astonishing that so old a man should have been able to out-distance her when she had had such a good start.

In spite of all she had seen and suspected, it was almost impossible

"You are attached to Nigel, and he to you, I understand?" said the man in grey at last.

Agneta hesitated. She was perfectly aware that the mystery which was being set up as an insuperable barrier to her marriage with Nigel did in fact centre about the person to whom she was talking.

"You wouldn't have much sympathy with me if that were true," she said, "since you hate Nigel so much."

He seemed shocked.

"Hate him! Oh, no! What I said was that he's a silly fellow."

"You tried to attack him," cried Agneta suddenly, throwing away all pretence of friendliness. "Why did you do that?"

The stranger answered her with an air of dignified simplicity which impressed her in spite of her antagonism.

"I intended to frighten him, that was all," he said. "The revolver wasn't loaded."

"To frighten him! Why?"

"Well, it's rather a long story, and I won't bother you with the details of it, which indeed you would probably not understand. The main facts are these: Nigel has been for years enjoying the use of property which does not belong to him, and which he refuses to give up. I don't ask you to take this from me. I ask you to put it to him whether it is not so. Perhaps your influence will be strong enough with him to induce him to see matters in the right light. Persuade him to do me justice, and to give up to me what is mine; tell him to drop the fanciful name he assumed in the hope of hiding himself and his misdeeds from me, and you will hear no more of my supposed attacks upon him, I can assure you."

Although knowing and trusting Nigel as she did, and fully convinced that there must be another and truer version of the story, it was impossible to avoid being somewhat

carried away by the earnestness and simplicity with which the stranger laid the case before her. She remembered what she had heard of the effect he had had upon Meg; she knew that his coming had even widened the barrier that existed between Mrs. Blair and her daughter, and, listening to him, she understood how this was.

There was so much charm about the man's manner, so much courtesy and gentleness; he wore such an air of quiet good breeding that, but for what she had seen with her own eyes and heard with her own ears in the library at Hare Place that night, she herself might have fallen strongly under the influence of his powers of persuasion.

"Wouldn't such matters as these you speak of be better managed by solicitors?" Agneta suggested modestly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Never get solicitors to do what you can do yourself," he said with decision.

But she persisted.

"But this is something you don't seem able to manage yourselves. Since you ask me to advise Nigel, I can tell you frankly that my advice will be to go to his solicitors and to get them to meet you."

There passed across the stranger's genial countenance what looked like a faint reflection of the malignity she had seen upon it when he looked at Nigel.

"I would only suggest," he said suavely, "that you would both find, if he were to consult his solicitors, that he had a very bad case. I even suggest that the reason he does not consult them is that he dare not."

Agneta was unpleasantly conscious of the fact that during the whole of the interview she had witnessed between the two men it was indeed Nigel who had appeared unwilling to take any daring steps. The intruder had defied him, had

suggested various expedients which it was clear Nigel was afraid to use. And when she herself had suggested summoning help it was Nigel who had promptly told her not to do so.

Evidently there was a family scandal of the gravest kind to be averted if possible. Evidently, too, it was Nigel who feared any revelation concerning it much more than did this stranger who had been described, on the one hand, as a relation of the family, and on the other as a blackmailer.

It seemed to Agneta that both characters might belong to him.

But while she was hesitating what reply to make to the stranger's suggestion that Nigel was afraid of him, an incident occurred which put rather a different complexion on the state of affairs.

Suddenly, while the stranger was standing in an attitude of easy and careless defiance, and Agneta was considering what she should say to him, the sound of a man's heavy tread, coming from the direction of the lodge, struck upon their ears.

The expression on the stranger's face changed at once, and hastily raising his cap to the lady with a muttered excuse for his abrupt departure, he plunged into the shadow behind the evergreens and disappeared from her sight.

Agneta was quite bewildered by the suddenness with which he went away. She stood watching the clump of evergreens behind which he had disappeared until the measured tramp of footsteps which had caused him to take his departure, came closer and closer; then turning the last bend, the form of one of the gardeners appeared in sight.

There was only one conclusion to which she could come and that was, that the man in grey, with all his assertion that Nigel was afraid of him and that he himself was the injured person in the quarrel, was

anxious to remain unseen by any one.

He had been lurking behind a hedge that afternoon when Auckland first caught sight of him; he had jumped into a dry ditch to avoid him. Since he had entered the library at Hare Place unannounced, it appeared most probable that he had got into the house, as Nigel suggested, when nobody was about. And now the approach of a human being frightened him into concealment again.

This did not look like the conduct of a person with a perfectly clear conscience. Agneta was more and more convinced, as she hastened towards the village, that there was some very ugly secret in the man's history.

Whether he had really intended to murder Nigel or not she could not tell. Nigel seemed to have thought he did; but, on the other hand, the stranger's manner had influenced her to this extent, that she found it hard to believe he could be capable of such a black-hearted crime.

Unless——

A thought struck her which made her again stand still, appalled at the suggestion which presented itself to her mind.

Was the man in grey a lunatic? And was he really Nigel's uncle, so that the family felt a strong distaste to taking proceedings even to put him under control?

If this were the case the difficulties in the story seemed to be in great part cleared away. She knew that a lunatic may have lucid intervals, may be apparently cured, and sent abroad into the world to all appearance sane, but yet liable to hallucinations and illusions which make him dangerous. Supposing this were the case with Nigel's uncle? What if, being the possessor of extensive property, the public safety had necessitated his seclusion for a time? Would not the result be to leave him with a strong idea of the

wrongs he had suffered at the very hands of those who had done their best for him?

As this idea grew in her mind Agneta became more and more convinced not only of its truth but of the terrible nature of the consequences of such a state of things.

Here was a man, to all appearance perfectly sane, burning with resentment against the persons who had been obliged to acquiesce in his confinement, and full of the idea that, in administering his property during his lunacy, they had acted in their own interests alone.

She understood how natural such a feeling would be in an ill-balanced mind; and although even now she found it difficult to understand that the courteous, charming old gentleman was insane, there seemed to her no alternative.

Full of this new thought she arrived at the cottage breathless and excited, and dashed into the sitting-room where Auckland, angry and indignant, was smoking sullenly.

"Well, and what have you been up to now?" he asked morosely, as she flung herself into a seat.

"Oh, Auckland, listen! I've got such a lot to tell you. I've seen the man, and I believe he is Nigel's uncle and that he's mad," she burst out, panting and breathless, and speaking in a hissing voice as she looked earnestly into her brother's face.

The smoky lamp on the table gave but a poor light, but she could see that his face changed, and that her idea struck him as a good one.

"By Jove, I never thought of that!" said he.

"It only came into my head when I was coming back," she panted, "and I almost hope it's true, for if so there may be some way out of all the worry for poor Nigel. Listen, Auckland, and I'll tell you all that happened."

She poured out her tale somewhat incoherently, but not leaving any

material point untouched upon, and her brother hung on her words, alarmed, perplexed, but more and more inclined, as she went on, to think that her suggestion about the stranger was highly probable.

When she had finished he strongly advised her to go back with him to Scarborough on the following day, suggesting that he himself would go to Sidford Castle, see his father, confess to part of their doings, and ask Lord St. Gowan's help in the solution of the difficulties of the Blair family.

But Agneta laughed at the notion.

"How can you ask my father to interfere in the affairs of other people?" said she scornfully. "He doesn't even want to keep up the connexion with the Blairs, or the acquaintance. He told us we were to have nothing more to do with them, and you will only get snubbed if you tell him what we've been doing. There's only one thing you can do. You can go up to Hare Place yourself and offer your services to Nigel."

"What services?"

"Any that you think my father could have given him," she retorted. "What could papa do that you could not? If there's anything to be done—and I'm afraid I can't see that there is—why shouldn't you be able to do it?"

But Auckland was shy of obtruding himself upon Nigel.

"I'm not old enough," he said, "to have any authority with him or with his uncle. If the uncle—and if he is an uncle—is a lunatic, Nigel can deal with him himself. If he's been shut up before, there won't be much difficulty, I should think, now that he's threatened his nephew, in shutting him up again. Anyhow, I'm not going to interfere, and I'm going away to-morrow, whether you are or not."

"I'm not!" snapped Agneta. And with a curt "Good-night"

to her brother she went out of the room and upstairs.

Auckland made up his mind at once, got out his notepaper and wrote to his father a short statement of the position in which he and his sister, and Nigel and his uncle, found themselves. He added that he hoped his father would come to Lansborne without delay, and if he could not do anything to help Nigel out of what looked like "a tight place," he would at least take Agneta home.

Auckland said nothing to his sister of what he had done; so that when about the middle of the following day Lord St. Gowan arrived at the cottage, having come straight from the station in a fly, Agneta was taken entirely by surprise, and was almost as much dismayed by the appearance of her father as he had been by his son's letter.

She looked fiercely at her brother, and hissed out: "This is your doing!"

And before she had time to say more, to hear any explanation or to attempt to escape, Lord St. Gowan was in the room.

He was pale with rage and almost speechless. When he recovered himself a little, however, his speech was very much to the point.

"You will go upstairs, put on your hat, and be ready to start with me for Sidford at three o'clock," he said shortly; and then he turned to his son. "And as for you, Auckland, I cannot imagine how any young man not a lunatic should have conceived such an idea as that of bringing his sister here. What made you do it? What insane idea was in your mind?"

"The insanity was mine, papa," put in Agneta, who was very quiet, very much frightened, and hardly able to restrain her tears. "I love Nigel; I couldn't rest till I had found out where he had gone and what had become of him. I thought I had found a clue, and I

got Auckland to come here with me. The clue was right: I did find him. And oh! I do hope, now you've come, you'll go and see him and try to help him. He was nearly murdered last night by this uncle, who I'm convinced is a lunatic."

"Nearly murdered!"

In the midst of his passion the viscount appeared to be suddenly struck by something in these words, which had a deeper meaning to him than to his son and daughter. He repeated them twice, the second time more slowly than the first, and then, with a more subdued manner than before, asked her to explain.

He listened, not without many a frown of disapproval at her share in what had happened, to Agneta's account of her adventure of the previous evening, and then he stood up and took up his hat, which he had flung down on the table when he came in.

"The whole business is absurd and disgusting," he said harshly. "That my children should concern themselves with the family affairs of other people, unasked and uninvited, and people, too, with whom I have expressed a wish that they should have nothing further to do, is amazing, monstrous, incredible! I blush for you when I think of it. I am going to Hare Place. Not, of course, with any intention of interfering in Nigel's interests, or in anybody else's; matters, indeed, which don't concern me. But I am going in order to let Nigel know that I disapprove strongly of your having come here, and that you will not be allowed to hold any further intercourse with the members of his family."

"Papa, you won't say that, just when he's miserable and persecuted!" cried Agneta in a trembling voice.

"And I must assure you, sir, in that case," said Auckland steadily, "that I should feel it my duty to

marry Meg without delay, in order to give her a protector in the midst of whatever troubles the family may have to go through."

The viscount waved his hand with a dry look.

"There are two persons at least to be considered in every question of marriage," he said shortly. "There is the bridegroom, of course; but there is also--the bride."

And with that he went out of the room and jumped again into the fly which had brought him, without giving either son or daughter the opportunity to reply.

"He means," stammered Auckland indignantly, when the fly had driven away, "that he'll insult poor Meg, so that she'll refuse to have me!"

"Oh, Auckland, he couldn't do that!" said Agneta reproachfully. "He only means that no girl as proud and good as Margaret would think of marrying into a family where she would not be welcomed."

"Whatever happens, I shall marry her," said Auckland, clenching his teeth.

But Agneta was quietly crying on the sofa, and had no words of comfort to offer him.

The world was a blank to her; she felt that she had disgraced herself utterly in the eyes of her own family without doing any good to Nigel. For that the stranger had really intended to murder the man she loved, she had long since ceased to believe.

Now she must go away without seeing him again, and without even bidding him that good-bye for which her heart ached.

Auckland soon left her to herself, and went out of the cottage, and Agneta, in despair, went slowly upstairs, fulfilled her father's command that she should prepare for departure, and then came listlessly downstairs again.

She must resign herself, like a

naughty child who has played truant, to being taken back to Sidford Castle, where she could look forward to nothing more pleasant than a sense of dire disgrace and humiliation as the result of her escapade, with the additional knowledge that, by her mad expedition, she had cut herself off for ever from the possibility of a renewal of her friendship with Nigel.

For Agneta did not, like Auckland, recognize the possibility of rebellion against the paternal commands. She had disobeyed once, but she knew she would not have the courage to do it again, and nothing but the miserable prospect of life without Nigel now presented itself to her.

Meanwhile her heart ached for him in his distresses; and when, glaring out of the window through tear-dimmed eyes, she suddenly caught sight of him walking slowly along the village street, looking attentively at the cottages he passed, and evidently on the look-out for some one, her heart leaped up for joy within her, and a low cry of relief and joy burst from her lips.

He caught her eye, and his own dark face was for a moment illumined by a smile as he hurried up the strip of garden and spoke to her through the window.

"I have come to say good-bye to you," he said in a hoarse and broken voice. "I won't come in. I won't stay more than two minutes. But I have seen your father; I know that we have nothing more to hope for, and I felt that I couldn't let you go, for the last time, without a word."

"What are you going to do? What has become of—your uncle?" whispered Agneta, trembling with anxiety.

"He has disappeared—for the time only, no doubt. But he'll turn up again. He'll never leave me alone. That is inevitable."

Agneta lowered her voice.

"Can't you get rid of his persecution? Can't you put the matter into your lawyer's hands?"

"It would do no good. He wants too much, and there are other reasons."

"Why don't you defy him?" she said.

Nigel looked at her steadily.

"I can't," he said. "He is my father."

was christened after him, as my father's eldest son. Ralph Nigel Kearsney. That is my full name, but one that I shall never use again."

He spoke solemnly and slowly, as if he had said all there was to be said. But Agneta, who was far from satisfied, uttered an exclamation.

"Ah, I see! That was why we saw your mother's portrait at the end of the picture-gallery at Hare Place. We recognized it at once, Auckland, because it was so like Meg, and I, because I couldn't help seeing that it must be Mrs. Blair herself."

"Yes," said Nigel, "it is her portrait, painted by Millais, and one of the gems of the collection."

There was a pause. Agneta waited to hear more, hoping that she would not have to ask for details of the story. But Nigel made no attempt to clear up the mystery or to allay the curiosity his words had aroused. So at last she said timidly:

"You're going to tell me all about it, aren't you?"

"No," he said, with so much decision that she saw at once that there was no appeal possible. "It's too horrible, and if you must hear it, let it be from other lips than mine. I need only say this: I have just seen your father, and he says, and I am forced to agree with him, that he can never allow my father's son to marry his daughter."

"Oh, but that's not fair, not just!" cried the girl. "Surely it was not my father who said that."

"He did, and I'm afraid he was right. He was quite kind, I may tell you, and he overlooked even the fact of our having masqueraded under a name which was not our own. He understood, I'm sure, my mother's feeling about it, the horror which made her feel that she could not bear to be pointed at, or to have her children pointed at, as being connected with a crime and

CHAPTER XVIII

NIGEL'S FATHER

NEVER in her life had Agneta experienced such a terrible shock as she did on hearing these words from Nigel's lips.

For a few moments she seemed stunned, and staring at him blankly, as if unable to understand, she leaned upon the window-sill without speaking.

Nigel remained standing among the flowers outside, shamefaced, miserable, with absolute despair in every line of his handsome, careworn face. He did not attempt to explain or to amplify his statement, but left the plain fact there for her to exercise her alarmed imagination upon.

"Your father!" she gasped at last. "He is Mr. Blair?"

Nigel shook his head.

"Blair was never our name. I believe my mother has some distant relations of that name, but I think she chose it at random when she wished our own name to be dropped — forgotten. She is Lady Kearsney, and my father is Sir Ralph Kearsney. My own name is Ralph, too, for I

a scandal which all England rang with at the time it happened."

Agneta, who was listening with the deepest attention, saw the weakness of this.

"But wouldn't it have been better if she had confessed, to people like my father and mother, for instance, who she really was? I don't mean when the thing first happened, and she was sore and miserable about it, whatever it was, but later, when she had got over the first edge of her grief?"

Nigel assented promptly.

"Of course it would have been better," he said quickly. "And, indeed, my mother always had it in her mind that some day she would confess. When we had certain hopes"—and a look of deep pain crossed his face, and she knew that he alluded to his affection for herself—"she had made up her mind to go to Lord St. Gowan herself, and tell him everything. But that was at a time when we thought the scandal would die away naturally and be forgotten. It was before we had any idea that it would some day be revived to the undoing of all of us."

Agneta began to understand.

"You mean," she said, "that you had thought you would never see him again?"

She dropped her voice to a whisper as she uttered these words, and Nigel gave a silent assent.

"And is reconciliation quite impossible?" she asked timidly. "Won't you all forgive?"

A faint, mocking smile passed over Nigel's face.

"If you knew more of the circumstances," he said, "and more about my father, you would understand that it is out of the question. It is a painful thing to have to speak like this about one's own father, but I will just say this, that when he appears to be seeking reconciliation, all he is really looking for is—revenge."

"Revenge?"

"And it is because your father knows that, and knows that I shall be subjected to a persecution from which I can't escape, and which would involve every one connected with me, that Lord St. Gowan says frankly that I must give up all my hopes. He is right, and I have no choice. It breaks my heart to think that, by the clumsiness of my letter to you, I failed utterly to do what I had meant to do, and to cut myself off from you and from happiness without causing you distress. You will forgive me, won't you?"

Of set purpose he was speaking in very solemn and deliberate accents, keeping his eyes away from her face, and exercising the strongest self-control, so that the emotion from which he was suffering should not appear in face or voice.

"No," cried Agneta hoarsely. "I won't forgive you, Nigel, for having doubted my love. Papa is right, I dare say, and perhaps you are right, too; but I'm right when I say that I won't give you up because you're unhappy, because you're persecuted. I think you ought to have been more frank with me, but I can see that that was more your mother's fault than your own. But it doesn't make any difference. I feel just the same, and I always shall. Or, if I don't, it's because, now I know you're unhappy and that you are being persecuted, I feel—I feel," and her voice was choked with repressed sobs, "that I care for you a hundred times more than I did before."

She broke down, and, ashamed to be seen, turned away into the room. Nigel hesitated a moment, and then, mastered by an emotion stronger than himself, turned to enter the cottage, when a voice behind him called to him by name:

"Nigel!"

It was Auckland St. Gowan, who, having wandered moodily away to fill up the time before his father's

return from Hare Place, was returning just in time to see Nigel at the door of the cottage.

When the two young men met face to face there was on the countenance of each an expression which neither had seen before. Auckland's eyes were full of excitement, as well as of infinite sympathy and compassion, so that Nigel guessed at once that he must have learnt something of his own terrible story.

"Where have you been? Whom have you been talking to?" asked Nigel quickly.

"To my father," replied Auckland. "I ran across the fields in the hope of warning you that he was coming to see you, and I went so fast that I caught up the fly he was in before it reached the lodge gates. He saw me, and guessed what I was up to, I suppose, for he called to the driver to stop, and got out and spoke to me. He was angry with me for what he called my interference, and when I stood up to him, he—well he told me everything, the story of your father, in fact."

Nigel nodded.

"I'm glad of it," he said shortly. "It must have been only a few minutes afterwards that he met me at the lodge gates. I had gone down to ask whether anything had been seen of my father, when Lord St. Gowan came up to me and told me, not in the least unkindly, but quite firmly, what I knew myself, that—that we must break it all off, my family and yours."

Nigel laughed derisively.

"You may break it off if you like," Auckland said with spirit. "But I'm going to marry Meg, even if you join my father in forbidding it. And I must tell you my opinion, and that is that you have jolly well made a fool of yourself over this, Nigel, and that you and Mrs. Blair have only yourselves to thank for the mess you've got into."

Nigel looked at first astonished,

and then indignant, at this blunt speech.

"You can't have heard everything or you wouldn't presume to express yourself so," he said.

"Oh, yes, I did hear everything," said Auckland doggedly. "And I know there's no getting away from the fact that your father can turn you all out and make soup of the property, and leave you poor. That's bad enough, of course. But it isn't dishonouring. It's just a misfortune, and if you'd been frank and open from the outset, and hadn't let Mrs. Blair carry out her mad idea of dropping your own name and burying you all, you would have found that everybody would have taken your part, and there would have been such a strong feeling in favour of you all after what you've done, that even Sir Ralph would have had to yield to the force of public opinion, and to treat you properly."

Nigel listened with the deepest interest and attention to the frankly expressed views of the young man. They had entered the cottage together and gone into the sitting-room, which Agneta had left.

"I think," said Nigel in a low voice, after a pause, "that there's a great deal in what you say. The bold course is generally the best course. But I think you hardly make allowance for my mother's feelings at the time this happened—twenty years ago. The shock almost killed her, and her health has never been satisfactory since. I was only a boy, and though, even then, I may have had dim suspicions that her plan was unwise, I could not interfere. Later, when we had acquired a new identity, as it were, it was so much easier to go on as we had begun than to rake up the old horror again. But I must tell you that both my mother and I knew that it was inevitable that we should make a confession to your people shortly. And you

can see that, but for my father's return, it would probably have passed off all right."

Auckland nodded.

"Of course it would," he said. "Well, and it's got to pass off all right now. Anyhow," he added stubbornly, with an aggressive glance at the older and taller man, "I'm going to marry Meg, whatever happens."

Nigel looked down at him with something like envy.

"I wish I had your pluck," he said. "I don't pretend I'm not glad to hear you say that, although I know there'll be an awful row, and that you'll have a rough time of it before you get your own way."

"And do you mean to tell me," said Auckland aggressively, "that you don't mean to stand up and make a fight for Neta?"

A shadow crossed the dark face of Nigel.

"I can be frank with you now, at least," he answered in a dry tone. "I don't think it matters two cents what I do or what I don't do. For I feel as sure as a man can feel that within forty-eight hours I shall be a dead man."

Auckland looked at him in horror.

"This is only a morbid fancy," he said.

"Can you say that, now that you know all the story?" asked Nigel, looking steadily into his face.

But Auckland was incredulous still.

"I can't believe," he urged gently, "that Sir Ralph nourishes so much ill-will towards you as you fancy. He is getting old—he struck me as particularly human and sympathetic. Don't you think you are doing him an injustice? Twenty years have a softening influence upon most men's feelings."

"Did you hear what happened last night?" asked Nigel shortly, "how Agneta cried out just in time to save me from being murdered,

shot through the head from behind by my own father?"

But Auckland would not believe this. Although he knew Sir Ralph's ugly history, his personal experience of Sir Ralph, when the latter was masquerading as the uncle of his own children, led him to think that there must be something to be said for the other side. The genial, courteous, charming, silver-haired gentleman was so exactly the reverse, in every respect, of his notion of a cold-blooded murderer that Auckland was inclined to think Sir Ralph's own version of the scene in the library was the correct one.

"Sir Ralph told Neta," he said, "that all he wanted to do was to frighten you, to get you to do what he wanted. He told her the revolver wasn't loaded."

Nigel shook his head.

"And I'm sure that it was."

"Have you any proof? Did you find the revolver and examine it?"

Nigel had to confess that he had not.

"While I was talking to Agneta at the window he must have found it and secreted it again. Anyhow, he disappeared, and then I found that the revolver had disappeared, too. I don't fancy its mission has been accomplished yet," he added, drily.

But Auckland still held out.

"Things will pan out better than you expect, I'm sure," he said. "Perhaps my father will see him, and argue him into meeting you half-way in your wishes, whatever they may be."

"No, he won't," said Nigel. "What he demands is nothing less than that I should go on managing the estate as I have done for the past twelve years and more, and that I should hand over the income absolutely into his hands without reserve. And, from what we've learnt about his life in London since his return to England, we

know what that would mean; he never gets any older or wiser, and everything would be gambled away, just as it was in the old days before—the tragedy.”

“Well, even that sacrifice would be better than the state of things that exists at present, if what you think is true,” said Auckland. “After all, his wife and family have a claim upon him, and your solicitors would surely force him to recognize it.”

But there was a look of stubborn resolution on Nigel's face, which showed that he was not to be argued with.

“No,” he said obstinately. “I made him a fair offer, and he refused it. I offered him half the income the estate produces, thanks to my careful management. I've given the best years of my life to the old place; I've nursed it, I've worked in it, developed it, paid off mortgages, released my mother's fortune, which had been swamped with the rest. And now I'm ordered to give it all up—all—and to a man who doesn't even dare to show his face in his own home. He doesn't dare let it be known that he's here. That's why I thought I was safe when I came to Hare Place; I thought as he couldn't come openly, he wouldn't come at all. I was wrong, as you see. Well, I won't work for his benefit; I won't see the old ruin over again.”

“But, surely,” persisted Auckland, “you would be working for your own good, too? Your father's an old man, and in the natural course of things the property will come to you before many years are over.”

Nigel shook his head.

“We're a long-lived race,” he said. “My father's only sixty, and having been obliged to live a careful life for the last twenty years, he probably has twenty years of another sort before him. I've grown old instead of him,” he

added bitterly. Then he turned abruptly and held out his hand. “Good-bye,” he said. “If I don't see you again, remember what I've told you.”

He was agitated and oppressed, and there was a look on his face which chilled the younger man and made him think of the victims called out for the guillotine.

With a silent pressure of hands the two young men separated, and Nigel, walking rapidly out of the cottage, crossed the village street to take the short cut home to Hare Place.

He was scarcely out of sight before Agneta, with red eyes and trembling lips, came into the sitting-room.

“You've let him go,” she said brokenly, “without wishing me good-bye?”

Auckland, who was much moved, tried to soothe his sister.

“It was better that he should go like that, without seeing you,” he said, as he kissed her forehead. “He was very near the point of breaking down, and you wouldn't have cared to see him cry like a girl, would you?”

“I'd have liked anything better than his going away without saying good-bye,” whimpered the poor child. “Auckland, what does it all mean? If you know anything about it, do tell me—do. I know just enough to make me miserable, but not enough to see why we've got to be unhappy through no fault of our own.”

Auckland flung himself into a chair and put his head in his hands.

“I didn't know the story myself till an hour ago, when my father met me and told me the outlines of it,” he said. “Nigel wished me to tell you, so here goes. Be prepared for the most ghastly tale of horrors you ever heard, and then see whether you can still call Nigel's father a nice old gentleman.”

Briefly then Auckland told his

sister the story of the tragedy in the Kearsney family, just as his father had told it to him.

Sir Ralph Kearsney had been one of the most recklessly extravagant men of his age and time, when, twenty years before, he had committed the crime which startled all England.

Married to a lovely woman, whose money he squandered, and whom he systematically insulted by his neglect, Sir Ralph found himself, when nearing the age of forty, up to his eyes in debt and difficulties, abandoned both by the friends of his own station and by the meaner class of parasites with whom he had spent his own and his wife's money.

There was not a vice or an extravagance in which he had not freely indulged, at a time when, to obtain money for gambling with, he began to use his private knowledge of his friends' affairs, and to try to induce Lady Kearsney to borrow from the men who sympathized with the wife and despised the husband.

At length, forced even more by the pressure of public opinion than by his own debts to leave the country, he went with his family, consisting of his wife, his infant daughter, and his two sons, to France, and then to Spain.

But he carried his old vices with him, and his conduct became a scandal wherever he went, until his wife, realizing the danger of his behaviour and of his example to her two boys, gave him the alternative of making some attempt at reform or of being left by her.

Already enraged by the staunchness with which Nigel, a boy of twelve, took his mother's part, Sir Ralph, thus threatened with the loss of those companions whose presence procured him still some sort of consideration, in an access of fury murdered his younger son before his wife's eyes, and would have followed up the ghastly

deed by killing his elder son but for the fierce fight made by the boy and Lady Kearsney, whose struggles kept the madman at bay while their shrieks attracted the attention of the neighbours.

The murderer was seized, tried, condemned to death.

By a wholly undeserved act of clemency, due to the supposition that the Englishman was at least partly insane, the sentence was commuted to imprisonment for life; and Lady Kearsney, her baby-girl and her remaining son, went back to England, shattered in health and nerves, but believing that they were safe for ever from Sir Ralph and his vengeance.

Broken and scarcely sane, Lady Kearsney at once dropped her husband's name, and, with a morbid horror of being pointed at as the heroine of the ghastly tragedy, assumed the name of Blair, under which she and her family had lived ever since. Meg, her only daughter, was a baby at the time of the tragedy, and the mother thought it was for her happiness that she should grow up in entire ignorance of the story.

For years the plan had been carried out without any hitch. Nigel, on leaving the public school where he was educated, had thrown himself energetically into the task of restoring order to the encumbered estate of his father, and of regaining for his mother the fortune which her husband's extravagance had lost. Being a shrewd, clever young fellow, endowed with an aptitude for business, and old beyond his years, Nigel had succeeded amazingly in this task.

Dividing his time between Hare Place, where he passed under his own name of Kearsney, and Rock Hall, where he lived with his mother and sister as Nigel Blair, he by his energetic management soon evolved order out of disorder, so that while allowing his mother

an income of fifteen hundred a year, he was paying off the burdens on the estate and developing it to the best advantage.

His love for Agneta, and his sister's for Auckland, aroused new ambitions within him. He had begun to hope that he might prevail upon his mother to throw off their assumed name and let him approach Lord St. Gowan in his own person, to ask for permission to marry Agneta, when an event occurred which put an end to all their plans.

On the occasion of a royal marriage in Spain, where Sir Ralph Kearsney was still confined, some fifty criminals were granted their pardon; and the English baronet was one of the felons thus let loose upon the world.

The news of his release did not reach his wife and son until he brought it in person, having found out their whereabouts with some difficulty, and introduced himself with great art as a reformed character.

Unfortunately for his pretensions, Lady Kearsney had a vivid remembrance of previous expressions of contrition and repentance on his part, and so strongly did she feel that he intended to have his revenge on his remaining son that she insisted on Nigel's going away to Hare Place that very night, believing that her husband would not dare to follow him where his identity would be discovered.

Inquiry through their solicitors soon elicited the fact that Sir Ralph Kearsney, on his way back from Spain through Paris and London, had given proof that his old tastes were not dead, and that he meant to make up for lost time in the matter of enjoyment and extravagance. In the meantime his demands were extortionate: he wished Rock Hall to be given up, his wife and daughter to return to him, and Nigel to manage the Hare Place estate as his steward, remitting the

whole income to him to be dealt with as he pleased.

Nigel had refused; Lady Kearsney had refused; and matters had reached a deadlock when Sir Ralph made his stealthy and inauspicious re-entry into the family mansion which he had not dared to enter as its owner and master.

Auckland related all this as briefly as he could to his sister, who listened without a word or even an exclamation. But when he had finished and got up from his chair to find out the meaning of her being so quiet, he found that, before he had come to the end of his narration, Agneta had lost consciousness.

From sheer horror she had fainted away.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MANIAC IN POSSESSION

WHILE this was happening at the cottage, Lord St. Gowan, after his short interview with Nigel, was on his way to Hare Place.

Although he felt that it was impossible for him, in the present circumstances, to allow his daughter to marry into a family where all was confusion, not to say danger, as was the case with the Kearsneys, he had spoken to the young man with the utmost gentleness, and had expressed with feeling his regret that the pleasant friendship between the two families should have come to such a sudden end.

"If ever you should be able to shake off this incubus—I suppose there is no necessity for us to use

another word," he went on to the young man, "I need not say that I shall be delighted. But I gather, from the fact of your having disappeared from Rock Hall on his coming there, that there is not much prospect of a satisfactory arrangement being come to."

Nigel shook his head hopelessly.

"Oh dear, no. He wants me to go on managing the estate for him, and he wants my mother and Meg to go and live with him. We both refuse, and his answer has been to come here by stealth and to try to shoot me. I don't suppose he will be satisfied until he has succeeded."

"But of what use would that be to him? He has got off once by the skin of his teeth; surely he isn't likely to risk it again."

"There was small risk about it as he had arranged it," said Nigel. "It was only the accident of your son and daughter being about here which saved my life, I verily believe. He intended to come here without being seen by any one, and if he had succeeded in his attempt I don't see how any one could have discovered who had done it. He would have got away, as he will get away presently, without leaving any trace."

The viscount frowned.

"I scarcely think that probable," said he. "Perhaps he really only intended to frighten you into agreeing with his plans. I don't want to interfere in your affairs, but if you think I could act as a mediator, to get him to listen to reason, I am quite at your service."

"Thank you; but it would be of no use, I'm afraid. I'm not in the humour to bargain with him, and he, I think, is not inclined to accept anything less than complete submission to his will. But I can't see the old place drained dry again after all my years of work; I can't see my mother's fortune lost again, after I had patched it up for her.

I'd rather take my chance of his becoming more reasonable when he finds how everything here will go to pieces without me."

Lord St. Gowan, who was walking slowly up the drive with Nigel, suddenly stopped short and held out his hand.

"Let me see what I can do," said he. "Where is Sir Ralph at the present moment?"

"That's more than I can tell you. The last person who appears to have seen him was one of the gardeners, who came upon him last night as my father was speaking to Agneta here in the park. The man says my father disappeared at once round a clump of evergreens, but he was not so quick but that he was recognized, and the news of his being about again has got abroad among the household, with the result that up at the house they are all in a state of panic. Nothing has been seen of him since, but I suppose he is in hiding somewhere."

The viscount drew himself up with an air of resolution.

"Look here," he said, "I'll see what I can do. I think it probable that he is, as you say, somewhere about, and I will go up to the house and have a search made for him. He is not likely to do me any harm, whatever his intentions may be as regards you. So I advise you to leave me by myself for a short time; go to the village and say good-bye to--Auckland," added the viscount kindly, "and I'll do my best to bring about something like a peaceful arrangement."

Without any hope, but very gratefully, Nigel accepted the suggestion, and went out through the lodge gates, leaving Lord St. Gowan to proceed towards the house on his errand of conciliation.

The viscount was not sanguine as to the result. He had the most intense loathing for the character of the man he was about to interview; for Sir Ralph Kearsney's

treatment of his wife, his vicious extravagance, and the questionable means he used to try to retrieve his fortunes, had been known to him well in the old days before the tragedy which had cut the baronet off for twenty years from a world where he was not missed.

To have to speak civilly to such a man went against the grain. But Lord St. Gowan was sincerely sorry for the victims of Sir Ralph's ill-doings; he forgave Lady Kearsney her long deception, and understood, perhaps better than did her own son, the loathing which had caused her to enter upon it. He was sorry, too, for Nigel and Margaret, and moreover he was not without suspicions that he would be unable to restrain his own son from marrying into the family.

He felt it, therefore, incumbent upon him to do his best to bring about a patched-up peace, and debated with himself the arguments he would use to induce Sir Ralph to leave Nigel in charge at Hare Place and to go away on a handsome income, leaving the rest to his family.

Knowing Sir Ralph, the viscount was afraid that whatever bargain he might make the baronet would fail to keep; and he was considering the difficulties of his own task when he became suddenly aware of a flitting of various half-seen forms through the park, all in the direction of the lodge gates.

First one figure and then another he saw gliding along over the grass under the trees; first a girl in cap and apron, evidently a young housemaid; then a manservant out of livery; the third was a gardener by the look of him; and at last, coming down the drive straight towards him at a rapid pace, a tall, thin man with a solemn manner, whom he perceived at once to be a person of some importance connected with the house.

"Can you tell me," asked Lord

St. Gowan of the man, who stopped short and raised his cap instinctively at this address, "whether Sir Ralph Kearsney is to be seen?"

The man started violently.

"Are you a friend of his, sir?" he asked civilly, but with some slight coldness.

"Well, I knew him many years ago. But it is as a friend of his son, Mr. Nigel Kearsney, that I have come to see him now."

The man's tone and manner changed at once, and he became communicative and eager to oblige the visitor.

"In that case, sir, I am very glad you have come," said he, "for there's just been a most terrible scene up at the house. I'm the steward, sir, for Mr. Nigel, and I wouldn't stay here but for him. There came a rumour through one of the gardeners last night, sir, that Sir Ralph had come back, and all the servants up at the house made up their minds not to stay if he was coming into residence here again: and this morning, not an hour ago, sir, just after Mr. Nigel had left the house, Sir Ralph walked up to the house and asked to see the housekeeper. She sent word, sir, that she refused to see him, and then Sir Ralph flew into such a passion that he was more like a madman than a sane man. He raved and stormed and swore at all the servants who dared to come near him, and threatened them and told them he was master, and that it was to him they must look for the future. So they all, sir, trooped out of the house one by one, till now there's scarcely a man left about the place, and the only woman is Mrs. Gregory, the housekeeper, who's locked herself into her own room, ill with anger and fright."

"And Sir Ralph himself, where is he?"

The man hesitated.

"When I last saw him, sir, he was raving up and down the picture-

gallery, and he'd just slashed the picture of my lady—his wife—across from side to side with a knife, sir. It was a pity to see it. And, though I hope I'm no coward, I came away, for I'm pretty sure he is armed. He came from the gun-room, I know, and he is a deadly shot, so I've heard."

Lord St. Gowan nodded. He had heard some strange tales, years ago, of the baronet's skill, and the uses to which he put it; but he was a brave man, and he meant to see this strange adventure through now that he had taken it in hand.

"Well," he said, "I'm going to the house, and I want to see him, to speak to him, to bring him to reason, if I can. Will you go back with me and give him this message: that Lord St. Gowan wishes to see him on behalf of his family?"

Mr. Jelf looked as if he did not care about the commission, but he conquered his repugnance and agreed.

"All right, my lord; I'll go with you. But I warn you to have a care, for if Sir Ralph isn't mad he's wicked enough to behave in a mad way. My father was steward here before me, my lord, so you may guess I've heard something."

The viscount nodded.

"All right. I don't think you and I have anything to fear; but I'm uneasy about his son, I confess."

"That's just it, my lord. Sir Ralph was shouting for him, and muttering things that I'd rather not have heard."

"Well, if he sees you and me coming up to the house together, at least he'll know that his son is not with us, won't he? And he'll perhaps be ready to listen to me when he would not to a younger man."

"Well, my lord, I hope so. But I never saw less reason in anybody's eyes than I saw in his just now."

They went up to the house to-

gether, feeling perhaps the least bit nervous as they approached the house, lest the baronet, armed with a rifle or revolver, should be posted behind the curtains of one or other of the open windows.

As there was no one left in the house to answer the door, Mr. Jelf led the viscount through the French window of the breakfast-room, which was open, and then the steward left the visitor while he went into the house in search of Sir Ralph.

It was a strange sensation for the viscount to find himself sitting alone in the great deserted mansion. Not a sound could be heard except the ticking of the clock and the occasional shutting of a door as the steward pursued his search rather noisily on account of his own fears.

An hour went by and he had not returned. Lord St. Gowan began to grow uneasy. Outside, the hot sunshine lighted up the soft green grass, the trees, the flowers, the peacocks on the terrace, and then it showed up a solitary figure making its way towards the house.

It was Nigel.

Lord St. Gowan's heart beat fast as he recognized the danger that might lurk in the nearly deserted house for the young man. Sir Ralph, with his heart full of vindictive feelings against his son, was in hiding about the house, and he was armed. Might he not be lying in wait for the return of the son whom he hated?

Lord St. Gowan had just gone to the window to wave the young man back, when the sharp "ping" of a revolver shot rang through the air.

CHAPTER XX

THE MINSTRELS' GALLERY

LORD ST. GOWAN held his breath. It was impossible to tell from what direction the revolver shot came, but he saw that Nigel looked upwards towards the upper floor of the house.

Then the young man came on at a run towards the open French window. The expression of his face had changed when the shot was fired. He had been looking grave, careworn, irresolute, and even at the distance of some twenty or thirty yards Lord St. Gowan had noticed that strange, haunted, fateful look which Nigel had worn ever since he became aware of his father's presence in the neighbourhood.

The sound of the shot seemed to wake him out of a sombre reverie. His eyes flashed, his pace quickened; plainly he recognized that he was face to face with the very danger of which he had been so keenly aware.

A second shot was fired, and then a third; but by that time Nigel had gained the terrace, and before a fourth shot could be fired he was in the breakfast-room, standing beside the viscount.

Lord St. Gowan would have spoken, congratulating him on his escape, but Nigel by a gesture advised silence, and they stood side by side close to the open window, listening for any sounds which might help them to discover what the enemy was going to do next.

But they could hear nothing: no sound of a closing door or window, no footstep, broke the silence. At last the viscount led Nigel further into the room and spoke to him in a whisper.

"Did you see Sir Ralph?"

Nigel shook his head.

"I could see no sign of anybody but yourself at any of the windows.

I'm convinced, though, that the shots were fired from one of the first floor windows, probably from the large bedroom just above us."

"I'm in great uneasiness," said Lord St. Gowan, "as to what has become of Jelf. I met him and the servants coming away from the house. Sir Robert had frightened them all away, but I induced poor Jelf to come back with me, and he at once set about finding your father. For a long time I heard him about the house, but for the last half-hour I have heard nothing more. I'm in great anxiety lest some harm should have befallen him. Sir Ralph threw himself into a rage at the refusal of the household to accept him in your place as its head; and he may have looked upon Jelf as the moving spirit of the rebellion, and——"

The viscount paused significantly. Nigel, however, was inclined to take a more hopeful view.

"I scarcely think my father would have gone the length of shooting any one but me," he said.

"His passion was never the blind, uncalculating fury of a maniac. That was what made it so deadly. Just as he killed my poor little brother with the deliberate intention of breaking my mother's heart, so, I believe, he has nourished the set purpose of killing me, in double revenge upon my mother and myself for our share in his punishment for his crime."

Suddenly he laid his hand upon the viscount's arm and glanced towards the door. They heard a slight creaking, suggestive of a human tread.

"He'll be in here in a moment," cried the viscount.

But at the sound of his voice, he having spoken aloud, there came to their ears another sound, as of a hasty retreat. Lord St. Gowan made a dash for the door, but Nigel held him back, and for a moment the two men struggled.

"Let me go, let me speak to him," persisted the viscount.

"It would be of no use," said Nigel; "and it would be dangerous, for he might shoot you in mistake for me as you opened the door. He was coming in here when he thought I was alone, but on hearing your voice he has gone back again."

Lord St. Gowan assented to this view.

"You're right, Nigel," he said. "It's not very like insanity to be so careful not to attack before witnesses; on the other hand, I think after this we shall have little difficulty in getting him shut up as a lunatic. The servants can bear witness to his behaviour this morning, and luckily I was here while the shooting went on. I only hope we may not find stronger proof still that he is not responsible for his actions."

Nigel, however, took a far more sombre view of the case.

"He will never allow himself to be shut up again," he said with decision; "of that I am convinced. He is exceedingly artful, and if he seems mad it is with intention. But you will see that it will be impossible to bring anything home to him; neither you nor I, for instance, can swear to having seen him fire the shots, although we are morally certain that it was he."

The viscount walked up and down the room, while Nigel remained on the alert near the door. Presently Lord St. Gowan stopped short in front of the younger man, and said:

"This suspense is getting on my nerves. Shall we make a bolt of it and give notice to the police?"

"I think," said Nigel, "that that is the best thing you can do. Even if he were to see you going away there is not the least fear of his attempting to do you any harm, and, as you say, you might bring help."

Something in his tone and manner

struck the viscount, and made him say:

"You have something in your mind that you won't say."

"Well," said Nigel, "the fact is, I know, and I feel more strongly than I know, that the crisis is coming, and that my father will never let himself be seized by the police or shut up as a lunatic, while at the same time I feel sure that he will not let me escape him again."

The viscount went straight to the French window, closed it and came back again.

"Very well, then," he said. "In that case I can't leave the house. We must await events together."

Nigel looked at him gratefully.

"It's hard upon you," he said, "to be drawn into this. Coming as a climax to the deception we have practised upon you for so long, it makes me feel guilty and ashamed."

"Well," said the viscount good-humouredly, "I think myself you have been grievously to blame in not being more open with me; but as that was chiefly the fault of Lady Kearsney, and not yours, enough has been said about it. In the meantime, what do you say to taking the bull by the horns, and going boldly in search of your father? I'll go first, and he is not likely to make the mistake of trying to shoot you through me."

Nigel hesitated.

"I should like myself to be doing something," he said. "In fact, if I had been alone I should have been out of the room, looking for him, long ago. Being with you it doesn't seem fair that you should take the risk."

"Do you think that is so great? We know the danger, and you know the house. A revolver is not the easiest thing in the world to use even in the hands of an expert, and if we are careful I don't think we need expose ourselves much."

Nigel agreed and, listening attentively at the half-open door, they went out into the passage.

It was dark and cool there. The light came dimly from the great hall beyond, and not one door appeared to be open on either side.

Together they advanced, listening, and without speaking. The effect of this silent walk at noonday through the deserted mansion with its empty rooms, its windows open in all directions, and the sunshine streaming into it from the south side, was uncanny and impressive. It seemed strange to be expecting an attack in the full light of the sun, with the sound of the singing of the birds coming in from the plantation through the open windows, the faint noise from the hay-making fields and the farmyards reaching the ears of the two men as they walked.

"Which way shall we go first?" asked the viscount under his breath.

"Straight to the hall, I suggest," said Nigel. "There is no hiding-place there from which he could spring out upon us or fire from an ambush, unless he were to have got into the minstrels' gallery, which is hardly likely, as the door leading to it is usually kept locked."

So they went forward, came out of the passage into the great square hall, which reached from floor to roof of the mansion, and the glories of which were a feature of the place.

Dark oak wainscoting, rich painted windows, old pictures, armour, trophies of various sorts, all combined to make this hall a striking and picturesque portion of the mansion; but neither of the two gentlemen had eyes for its beauties just then. Entering with caution, watchful of any possible movement in the doors around, they walked slowly forward across the dark oak floor. Lord St. Gowan was especially careful to keep his eye on the angle of the staircase lest

Sir Ralph should be crouching there ready to attack them if they were to attempt to go upstairs.

Nigel, on the other hand, was more suspicious of the minstrels' gallery than of any other corner of the wide hall.

For whereas they could see all the closed doors, and be on the alert against the sudden opening of any one of them, and while they could keep an eye upon the staircase and be prepared for the abrupt upspringing of a crouching figure at the angle, they would in any such case have had a chance of making their escape before Sir Ralph could take fair aim.

But with the minstrels' gallery it was different. It was in the darkest corner of the hall, and moreover it was so screened by a carved oaken balustrade in front that Nigel thought it possible that a man could remain concealed there and take good aim through the interstices of the open carving.

The screen was indeed very low, so low that for fear of accident the gallery was usually kept closed. But the baronet was a small man, and was quite clever enough to know how to make the most of his covert.

So Nigel kept his eyes fixed upon the screen, without, however, seeing anything to justify his suspicions, when suddenly the sharp ping-ping, the double report made by a shot in a confined space, struck upon his ears.

"Back, back!" cried he to Lord St. Gowan, who was close to the entrance to the passage by which they had come.

He himself, however, did not go back, but made a rapid dash across the hall towards a door in the corner, right under the minstrels' gallery. This door, which was screened by a tapestry hanging, led to a narrow, winding staircase which went directly to the gallery itself; it was, in fact, the sole

ing out over the low balustrade to take aim at his son as he retreated through the doorway below, had overbalanced himself, and, falling on his head, had broken his neck and must have died instantly.

It was marvellous how quickly the news of the fatality spread.

Even before the doctor who had been sent for arrived upon the scene, there came back first one and then another of those members of the household whom Lord St. Gowan had met that morning on their flight from Hare Place. They had all heard such stories of Sir Ralph, and had been so much alarmed by the paroxysm of rage into which he had thrown himself, that they had resolved with one accord not to remain at the house while he was the master of it. None of them had, however, gone very far away; one or two came from the lodge, where they had been awaiting events, and before long the rest returned from the village, where most of them had taken temporary refuge.

Even before this, however, Agneta and Auckland, having been among the first to hear of the tragedy, came quickly up the drive towards the house, and were admitted by Mr. Jelf himself, who had watched their approach from the breakfast-room window.

Auckland asked question after question, eagerly, volubly, betraying in every word and look the fact that the tragedy was no tragedy in his eyes.

Agneta was more subdued. She was flushed and almost tearful, and was not looking pretty at all, with her red eyes and her twitching features, when Nigel, having heard of her arrival, came to meet her in the breakfast-room, into which she and her brother had been shown.

Nigel was very pale and haggard, and looked, as he came in, nearly as old as his father had looked that morning.

"It's dreadful, isn't it?" he said, as he held out his hand to Auckland. He turned to the girl. "Neta, you ought not to have come," he said sharply.

This reproof, instead of depressing the girl, put a little spirit into her. Breathing quickly, she came close to her brother's side, and clinging to him, held out her hand to Nigel.

"Why? Why oughtn't I to have come?" she said in a broken voice. "Am I the only person who is to be forbidden to tell you what I feel, what we all feel?"

For a moment they looked at each other in silence. Then she burst into tears, and Nigel, pushing Auckland away, put his arm round her. She put up her face frankly to be kissed.

"You may—now," she whispered.

They both felt, what neither could express, that the obstacles between them had now been cleared away.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SILVER LINING

THERE had been great anxiety at Rock Hall since the abrupt departure of the stranger who had called himself "Sir Robert Kerslake."

He had gone away without any notice, leaving a note to be delivered to the mistress of the house, in which he informed her that, having failed to find that sympathy and kindness which he had a right to expect from her, he had returned to town.

Mrs. Blair had received this statement with incredulity. Al-

though she believed, with Nigel, that her husband dared not present himself openly at Hare Place, where the story of his crime had spread horror in the neighbourhood—she was yet vaguely conscious that his departure meant mischief, and was uneasy until she knew what had become of him.

She thought it most likely that he had gone to consult his solicitors in London as to the means he should employ for enforcing what he called his rights, and she felt very much afraid that he would be able to insist upon all that he wanted, to the ruin of the prospects of herself and her children.

For that Sir Ralph would squander again as he had squandered before, she knew him too well to doubt.

Margaret regretted the departure of that "uncle," whose relationship she vaguely suspected not to be what he professed, but whom, in spite of some misgivings, she admired and liked.

Not having conceived against his daughter, who had been but a baby at the time of his great crime, the same antagonism which he felt towards his son, Sir Ralph had been kind and bright with her; and one of his chief reasons for anger against his wife was that she refused to allow him to take his daughter away.

It was in vain that he insisted upon his rights on this point. Mrs. Blair was stubborn. And whenever he talked about enforcing them, she had recourse to the threat that, if he should attempt to make known to the girl the fact that he was her father, she would tell Margaret the whole story, which would at once alienate whatever affection she might have conceived for him.

When he disappeared Margaret became more certain than ever that he was no "uncle," but a nearer relative. Long before this

she had had her suspicions aroused as to the real nature of the relationship in which she stood to "Sir Robert." And when he went away, she said to her mother, point blank:

"Mammie, isn't 'Sir Robert' really your husband and our father?"

And Mrs. Blair, looking steadfastly at her daughter, answered:

"Yes."

"May I not know any more?"

"I think you'd better not, dear," said Mrs. Blair. "At any rate, I can tell you nothing till Nigel comes back."

"Will he come back soon?"

Mrs. Blair hesitated.

"I think so—now," she said at last.

"Then it was because of my father's coming that he went away?"

Mrs. Blair burst into tears, and breaking at last through her long reserve, told her the whole story, softening down the details of the tragedy as much as she could, but leaving no point unexplained.

By the time she had finished, Margaret, who had heard it all without a word or a sign, crouching, with clasped hands, on the low chair on which she was sitting, was crying quietly.

Mrs. Blair lay back, grasping tightly the arms of her chair.

"There," she said. "You would not rest till you knew. How much the happier are you for knowing?"

But the girl dried her eyes, and said:

"Mammie, dreadful as it is to know it, I'd rather be sure what it is that is spoiling all our lives than go on wondering, puzzling my head, feeling as if a sword were hanging over us all the time. Now I know the worst, I shall get over it. I know why Nigel has gone away, why my—f—f—father has gone. I can guess why Auckland and Agneta have been sent away, too.

Of course they know now, and they have been told that they must give us up. Well, I couldn't help knowing that something had gone wrong. Now that I know what it is I can bear it."

It was on the day following this scene between the mother and daughter that the tragedy which brought Sir Ralph's life to an abrupt end happened at Hare Place.

Nigel and Lord St. Gowan at once decided not to give the ladies at home the shock of learning what had happened by telegram. They made their arrangements hastily, and went back that very evening to their respective homes, travelling together—the viscount, his daughter, his son, and Nigel.

There was now not even a pretence made by Agneta or Auckland of any further estrangement between the families. Agneta was very quiet and rather timid during the journey, and seemed oppressed by the awful thing which had happened. But Auckland spoke openly of Margaret, and informed his father that he should go straight to Rock Hall with Nigel, to help him to break the news.

And Lord St. Gowan made no objection.

When, therefore, the party arrived at the station which was nearest to both the homes they broke up, Lord St. Gowan, who had given no hint of his return, taking a fly with his daughter, and driving back straight to the Castle; while Nigel and Auckland got into another, and went to Rock Hall.

The two ladies had just finished dinner when the fly drove up to the door. The dining-room was at the back of the house, and although through the open window they heard the sound of wheels they did not connect it with the return of the two young men.

Mrs. Blair rose hurriedly to her feet.

"Is it—he?" asked Margaret, very pale.

"Your father? I suppose so."

But before they could leave the room a servant came in and announced that Mr. Nigel and Mr. St. Gowan had come. It was in the hall that they all met, and Nigel taking his mother in his arms led her into the drawing-room and whispered:

"It's all over, mother. He's dead."

He then told her the facts briefly, and then added that Lord St. Gowan and Auckland and Agneta had all been at Hare Place, and that there was no longer any estrangement between the two families.

"Why, mother," he went on, "I've brought Auckland back with me, and with Lord St. Gowan's knowledge!"

But looking round he saw no trace of his friend. Mrs. Blair, however, who was much overcome by the tragedy, of which she had just heard all the details, merely leaned back in her chair, lost in sad thoughts. The first tragedy had spoilt her life for her; and although this second terrible event had shaken her less severely, still there remained enough of horror and shock to leave her prostrate, nerveless, and for the time incapable of coherent thought.

Meanwhile, Margaret, on seeing the young men arrive, had at once fled into the garden, whither Auckland followed her with the least possible delay.

The girl did not know what to think of the arrival of the two together; but having become aware of the real nature of the barrier which stood between the two families, and being as yet without knowledge of the tragic suddenness with which it had been torn down, she was too proud to risk an interview with a man whom she knew

she could never meet again on the old terms.

"Good evening, Meg!" cried Auckland as soon as he was within hearing, bawling out his greeting as she went quickly in the direction of the shrubbery with the intention of avoiding him.

It was impossible for her to ignore this greeting, however, so she turned and came slowly towards him.

She was cold, dignified, reserved, trying hard to make him recognize the fact of which they were both aware, that by the wish of Viscount and Lady St. Gowan the intercourse between the two families was at an end.

Auckland, however, appeared to be entirely unconscious of this fact. He came towards her with hand outstretched, and with a smile on his face, which was scarcely the right expression considering the nature of the news he had brought.

She gave him her hand coldly and he retained it in his.

"Don't you wonder at my impudence, Meg, in daring to come here with your brother when by a sort of official understanding you, of Rock Hall, and we, of Sidford, were understood to meet henceforth as strangers, as they say in melodramas?"

Margaret faltered, perceiving that something of grave import had occurred.

"Where have you come from?" she asked hurriedly. "And why did you and Nigel come together?"

He hesitated.

"Don't you know anything yet?" he said in a low voice.

She bowed her head.

"I know—what our name is. I learned it only this afternoon, I suppose—" and she looked at him keenly—"you know all about that, too?"

She was crimson with shame as she spoke; for the horrible story was fresh in her mind, and she had

not yet had time to get over the shock of it.

"Yes," said he more gravely. "I know everything. I've just come with Nigel, and my father, and Agneta, from your family place, which is now—your brother's."

A cry escaped her lips.

"Then—I suppose—you have brought some dreadful news?" she stammered.

"It would be too dreadful for you to hear," replied he gravely, "but for the fact that it was the only thing that could happen which would not have broken both your heart and Lady Kearsney's."

She started at hearing her mother spoken of by the name she had never known her to bear.

"You know, don't you," he went on gently, "that your mother is Lady Kearsney?"

"Yes, I do know that."

"Well, now you have to get accustomed to the fact that your brother is not Nigel Blair, but Sir Nigel Kearsney."

"You mean," said Margaret in a whisper, "that my father is dead?"

"Yes. He died by an accident—a terrible accident—at his house, Hare Place, this morning."

"But how? I don't understand."

He put his hand caressingly on her arm, and Margaret did not repulse him.

"You'd better not hear any more yet," he said gently. "It would shock you, I'm afraid. Meg, there's no more estrangement between your family and mine now. My father did what he could for Nigel this morning, and—we all came back together—Agneta and all. You are going to have me, Meg, aren't you? I told my father you were, even before we all made it up. Come, don't let me think you don't care. I know you do. I know you must, when you've

always been so kind, and when you must have known!"

But Margaret had shrunk back, sure that something was being kept back from her, and not at all certain that Auckland was not drawing on his imagination, as far, at least, as his description of the share his father and sister had had in the events of the day was concerned.

"I don't understand," she said faintly. "You say Agneta and Lord St. Gowan were at my father's house this morning?"

"Yes. And more than that—my father will be here this evening. He said he would not lose a moment, when he had told my mother everything, in coming to see Lady Kearsney and in offering her his condolences."

"Condolences!"

She spoke like one in a dream. Having seen only the gentler, better side of her father's nature, having been influenced by his kind voice and amiable manners, Margaret was still feeling the shock of the story her mother had told her about her married life. Now this second shock, following so fast upon the first, made her reel.

Auckland saw that he had gone too fast, and that he had forgotten how much in the dark she had always been kept about her own and her people's history.

Fortunately Nigel appeared at that moment at the drawing-room window, and gave the two young people an excuse to return to the house, where the brother and sister met in silence.

Then Auckland caught sight of Lady Kearsney lying back in her chair within the room, and he

hastened in, leaving Nigel with Margaret.

"Nigel," she whispered, "is it all true? I knew—about his being my father: is it true that he is dead, and that you are Sir Nigel Kearsney?"

"Yes," he said in a low voice.

"And that Lord St. Gowan—and—Agneta——"

Nigel turned to the house.

"Listen," he said. "There he is, I feel almost sure."

He had caught the sound of hoofs on the gravel in front. He was right. The viscount, full of kindly feeling towards Lady Kearsney and her family, had not even waited to dine before he left the castle, but came straight to Rock Hall to offer to Lady Kearsney condolences none the less soothing that they were perforce of rather a hollow kind.

His final words to her were meant for more than her ears:

"I suppose, Lady Kearsney, we shall have to be hunting up our stores of old lace, old silver, and anything of that sort we have treasured up in our cupboards and cabinets—for wedding-presents."

In spite of the gloom which hung over them all as a consequence of the tragedy of the morning, there was a distinct feeling of relief and gratitude in the minds of all his hearers, to the viscount for giving them something pleasant to think about than that which was occupying their minds.


Lady Kearsney gave him a glance of mild rebuke, but from the one to the other of the young people there passed a ripple of subdued contentment as they realized that the last obstacle to the happiness of four hearts had been swept away.

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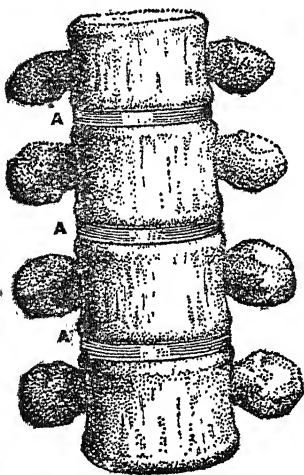
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